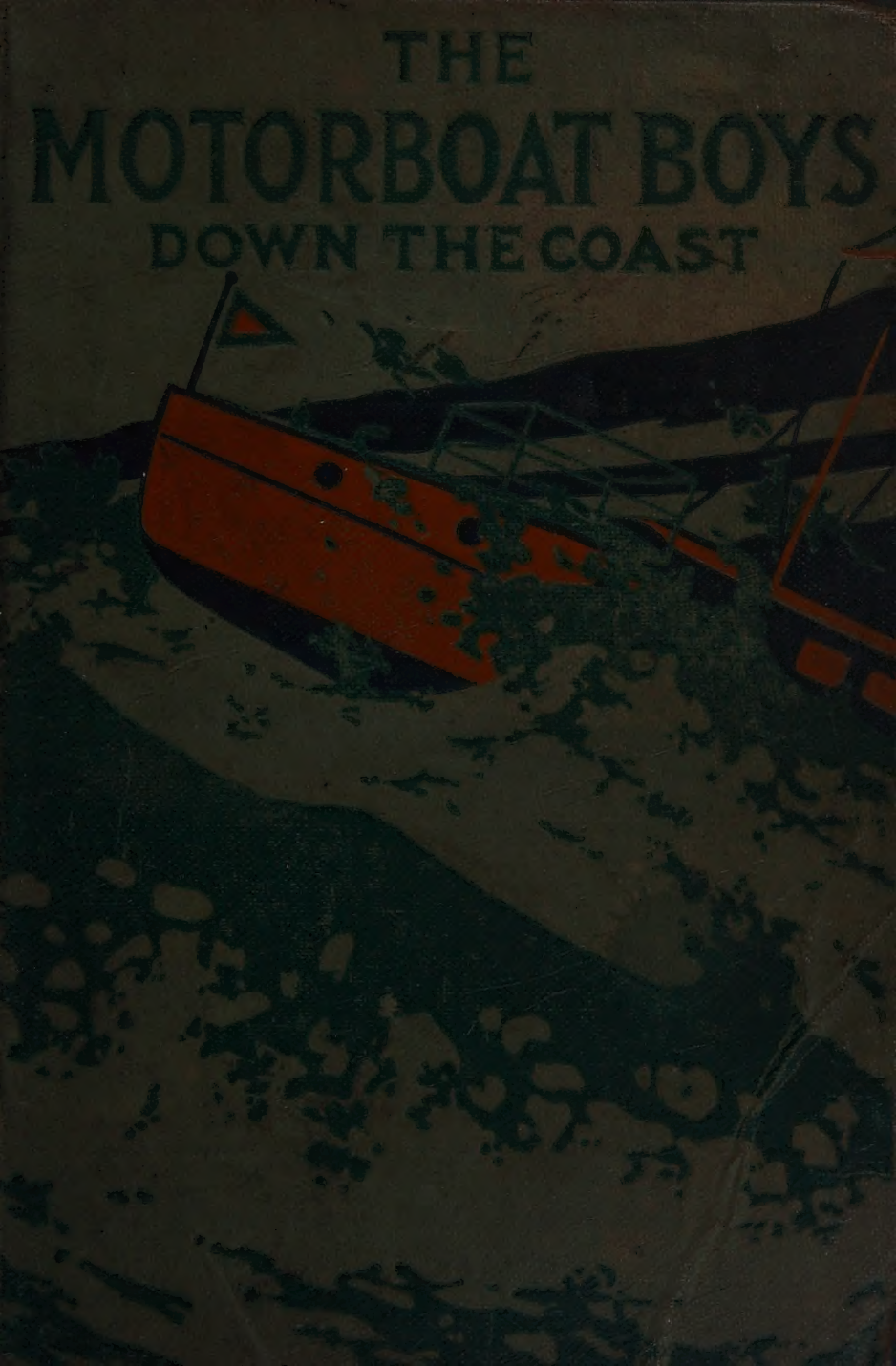
THE MOTORBOAT BOYS DOWN THE COAST



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Edward Donald Reese.

JACK, CROUCHING THERE, WITH ONE ELBOW RESTING ON HIS KNEE, TOOK AS GOCD AN AIM AS THE CONDITIONS ALLOWED

Motor Boat Boys
Down the Coast

Or

Through Storm and Stress to Florida

By

LOUIS ARUNDEL

Author of "Motor Boat Boys on the St. Lawrence," "Motor Boat Boys Cruise Down the Mississippi," "Motor Boat Boys on the Great Lakes," "Motor Boat Boys Among the Florida Keys"

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THE MOTOR BOAT BOYS DOWN THE COAST;

or

Through Storm and Stress to Florida

CHAPTER I.

AFLOAT ON THE LOWER DELAWARE.

"Toot your horn, Jimmy, and let everybody know we're off at last!"

"Sure, there's the ould *Wireless* coming up on us, hand over fist. It's a broth of a bhoy George Rollins is for speed!"

"Yes, he always starts out well, and with a rush; but generally manages to have his engine break down; and then even the wide old tub *Comfort* gets there ahead of the narrow speed boat. Now give 'em a blast, Jimmy. The coast cruise is on!"

Accordingly, Jimmy Brannigan, who served as cook and crew aboard the staunch motor boat *Tramp,* some twenty-three feet in length by six feet wide (the boat, not Jimmy), and with Jack Stormways as pilot, puffed out his cheeks and blew.

It was a necessary method for sounding the

conch shell horn, which, if blown like a bugle, would send out a screech that could be heard a mile away.

Answering toots came from the two other crafts that had just left Philadelphia astern, and were heading down the old Delaware River, bound for Florida.

Here were six of the happiest young chaps on the face of the globe; and, indeed, how could they help it? Blessed with good health; three of them owning motor boats that had served them now for two seasons, and with stores aboard for a "bully" voyage down the Atlantic coast, taking the inland passage, what more could the heart of a real boy, with red blood in his veins, sigh for?

These six lads lived in a town "out Mississippi way." They had long ago ceased to be novices in the management of motor boats, and the great benefit they seemed to have secured from previous trips on the water, both down the wonderful Mississippi and on the Great Lakes, had convinced their fathers that they were to be trusted under any and all conditions.

Hence, when a calamity befell the high school of their native place, which all of them attended, fire destroying the main part of the building, so that there could be no session un-

til some time after Christmas, and a brilliant scheme dawned upon the mind of Jack Stormways, they were not long in convincing those who controlled their destinies that the opportunity for a run down the Atlantic coast before winter set in, with possibly a similar cruise along the Mexican gulf to New Orleans, was too good to be lost.

And so they had come to Philadelphia, with this object in view.

As to the money part—for it takes a heap of cash to transport three motor boats a thousand miles and more by fast freight—that was the easiest part of the programme.

It happened that the treasury of the Motor Boat Club was quite flush at that particular time. On one of their former cruises, up on the Great Lakes, and in the vicinity of the Thousand Islands, these lads had been instrumental in bringing to justice a set of rogues, for whose apprehension a large reward had been offered by the authorities.

That sum, with others picked up in various ways, had been lying at interest all this while. They had intended using it for their next cruise, no matter where that might happen to take them.

Various indeed had been the suggestions made from time to time; and some of them

bordering on the ridiculous. Strange to say, it was Nick Longfellow, the companion of George Rollins on the narrow beam speed boat *Wireless,* who gave utterance to most of these absurd propositions.

Nick was fat, and a tremendous eater. As a rule he could not be said to be at all bold by nature; and yet he declared that nothing would please him half so much as that they explore the Orinoco River in South America, and discover things never before known by white people.

Then there had been Josh Purdue, the tall and thin assistant of Herbert Dickson on the beamy and steady if slow *Comfort,* who wanted them to lose themselves for an entire month in the depths of the swampy country to be found along the St. Francis River.

But when Jack sprung his sensation about the long trip down the coast, and around to New Orleans, it took like wildfire, and every other idea was speedily forgotten. Preparations were hurried, the boats shipped, and later on the boys turned up in Philadelphia, where they found their craft waiting for them.

And now, here they were, at noon on this late September day, with the prows of their beloved boats turned toward the south, and

plowing the waters of the Delaware, the Quaker City left far astern.

Doubtless many aboard the bustling tugs, and the vessels that came and went, smiled as they heard the merry tooting of horns exchanged between the three little power boats that were speeding along toward the wider reaches of the lower river.

They easily guessed that the boys had a good time ahead of them; but truth to tell not one could have imagined the extent of the voyage upon which the Motor Boat Club had now set out, with so confident a mien.

Taken as a whole, a merrier set of young chaps could hardly have been assembled than the six who constituted this same club. They had, of course, their faults; but by now they were so accustomed to each other's society that seldom was a discordant note heard.

Jokes abounded, tricks were sometimes played, and accepted with good nature; and without exception the boys had become very fond of each other.

For instance, there was stout roly-poly Nick, who could never tear his mind away from his favorite subject of eating, and whom thin and cadaverous Josh liked to tantalize whenever the occasion offered, because he himself, while a great cook, seldom found

much appetite for his own messes, being troubled from time to time with indigestion.

Then Jimmy, who, it can easily be understood, had sprung from the rollicking Irish race, possessed a fine voice, as sweet as that of any girl; and many the time did he beguile an evening at the campfire with his songs and his clever dancing. Jimmy, by the way, happened to have a fiery thatch, a multitude of freckles, and upon occasions lapsed into the brogue of his ancestors, although he could talk as well as the others when he chose.

George had the speed mania. This had developed early in his career, for his one delight was to outstrip others in a race. Consequently, when he had his boat built, he sacrificed lots of things to have it narrow in beam, and naturally it was anything but a pleasure to be aboard the cranky craft.

His mate, Nick, had suffered in the past from this condition of affairs; and the log of former cruises would show that he had met with more than one mishap because it was necessary to perfectly balance the *Wireless* at all times. Poor Nick often declared that if he chanced to fail to part his hair directly in the middle, trouble was sure to follow.

The *Comfort,* as its name would indicate, had been fashioned on just the opposite plan,

and speed was the last thing considered. They made all manner of fun of Herbert's boat, and called it such derogatory names as "The Tub" and "The Ark"; but all the same, when hurry was not an object, those aboard certainly had the best of the controversy. And then the quick-going boats always had to wait for Herb and his "life-raft," so they did not gain anything in the end.

Then about the third craft, called the *Tramp,* and owned by the recognized leader of the sextette, Jack Stormways. It united the good qualities of both the other boats in that it was fast and at the same time steady. While on occasion the cigar-shaped *Wireless* could leave Jack in the lurch, and the beamy *Comfort* give more elbow room, taken as a whole the *Tramp* was the ideal cruiser; and both the other skippers knew it away down in their secret hearts, though always ready to stand up for their own boats.

It was close on the beginning of October when they made their start from the City of Brotherly Love. For some time they would have to dodge the many vessels that were moving hither and thither before the busy port; but later in the afternoon they could expect to have clearer weather, where the river widened out, with the shores farther apart.

For once George moderated his pace, and hovered near the others. He felt so joyous over the sensation of being once more afloat, and with such a glorious voyage ahead, that he wanted to be where he could exchange remarks with his chums, and hear what they thought.

George had been doing considerable puttering with his engine lately. He claimed that he had been able to increase its speed several miles an hour.

"Wait till I get a good chance to show you, fellows," he now remarked, with a satisfied air; "why, I expect to make rings around your blooming old *Tramp,* Jack; and as for "The Ark," why, it'll be figure eights for hers."

"Wow! don't I just see my finish, then," wailed poor, fat Nick, shaking his head sorrowfully. "The vibration always was just fierce, and now it'll just rattle me, so I'll be only skin and bones. You'll be calling me the Living Skeleton before we ever get to Jacksonville, I bet you, boys."

"Oh, when it gets so you just can't stand it any longer, call on Josh here to change off with you, like he did once before," laughed Herbert. "Josh is built on the order of a match, and seems to be especially suited for a narrow-beam boat."

But the party mentioned did not seem to like the prospect any better than Nick, to judge from the protest he immediately put out.

"Me to stick to the *Comfort,* fellows. One thing sure, if you are last, you always know where you're at; and that's what I never did when on that broncho of a *Wireless.* Why, it threw me twice; and souse I went into the drink."

"But just think, Josh," insinuated cunning Nick, "all this shaking would be the best thing ever for that indigestion of yours. It rattles up the liver, and does a heap of good. I don't need that sort of thing, you see. Last time you bunked with George you know you improved a hundred per cent."

"Huh! mebbe," grunted Josh, "but it wasn't worth it, I tell you."

"Look at that tug bucking up against the tide, will you?" exclaimed George just then—being humiliated by all this talk about the cranky qualities of his pet, and anxious to call their attention elsewhere in order to change the subject.

"Must be a greenhorn at the wheel, or else the fellow's had more drink than he had ought to tackle," declared Nick.

"He sure does wobble a heap," admitted

Jack, keeping a wary eye on the approaching craft, lest it foul his own boat, and bring sudden disaster on the cruise which had begun so auspiciously. "But perhaps that's a trick these river pilots have when heading up into an ebb tide. They know all the wrinkles of the game, I guess, and how to save themselves from wasted efforts."

"Say, that rowboat had better look out; if he makes a quick turn with the tug he's apt to run the little punkin seed down," George declared, with a note of anxiety in his voice; for he was nervous by nature, as his love for racing and making high speed would indicate.

"That pilot must be watching us all the time, wondering whatever we're heading for down the river, because the duck shooting below isn't on yet. There! he's swung about again! I hope he don't knock that rowboat galley west!" called Herbert.

"Hey! look to your starboard—you're running down a boat!" shouted Jack, dropping his wheel for three seconds in order to make a speaking trumpet with both hands.

There was a brief interval of suspense. Then came a plain crash, accompanied by loud shouts, and more or less excitement aboard the tug that was heading up river way.

"He did it!" bellowed Josh, fairly wild with

eagerness. "Oh! I'm afraid the poor fellow will be drowned before that tug can come about and go to his rescue. Turn your bally old tub, Herb, can't you? It takes a whole day for you to get around."

"No use of our trying it," declared the skipper of the big roomy *Comfort,* calmly, for nothing could start Herb out of his customary condition of mental poise, because he is as steady in his way as his boat; "he'd be drowned twice over before we reached him. Besides, there goes Jack in his *Tramp,* shooting straight for the smashed rowboat. Unless the poor fellow was injured and has already sank our chum will get him all right, Josh."

"That's right," declared Josh. "George has gone and got flustrated, so that he turned the wrong way; but if anybody can save that fellow it's Jack Stormways. Oh! I hope he does it, because I'll take it as a good sign that our new voyage down the coast is going to have a lucky start!"

CHAPTER II.

A GOOD OMEN FOR THE START.

Jack Stormways was always prepared. He never lost his head in an emergency, for which more than one of his chums had had reason to be thankful in times past. So, on the present occasion, when he saw that the tug could not make a complete circuit against the running tide and reach the wrecked rowboat in time to be of any assistance to the unfortunate who had been hurled into the Delaware, Jack instantly headed the little motor boat for the spot.

"Get up in the bow with you, Jimmy, quick now, and take the boathook along! I'll slow down when we get there; and perhaps you can grab him in!" the skipper called out.

Accustomed to obeying, Jimmy made haste to snatch up the implement mentioned, and which had many the time proved its value in recovering things that had been swept overboard in a wind storm.

Then he hurried to gain a position near the bow of the boat, where he crouched, after making sure of his footing, so as to guard against

a shock when he clapped the boathook into the clothing of the drowning man.

"I see him, Jack!" he bawled immediately. "He's holding to the boat, so he is!"

"All right, Jimmy," echoed the skipper, calmly; "I glimpsed him before you did, I reckon. Steady yourself now, and try not to make a foozle of it, old man. There you are. Jimmy; get him!"

And Jimmy did the same, catching the coat of the man in the water with his boathook, and holding on tenaciously. Jack, meanwhile, turned his engine backward, so that the momentum of the boat was promptly checked.

The man had been clinging to the rapidly sinking wreckage. In another half minute, no doubt, he would have been left without any support; and as he did not seem able to swim a stroke, his end must have speedily come.

Jimmy drew in with the haft of the boathook, until he could stretch down and seize upon the collar of the man's coat. As the Irish lad was brawny and nerved just then to mighty deeds, he managed to hoist the fellow into the little motor boat.

The unlucky man was white, and pretty nearly drowned. He had just had enough sense to cling desperately to the wreck of his

boat, and then allow Jimmy to do the rescue act.

"Did you get hurt when that tug struck your boat?" asked Jack, for that was what he feared.

The man was blinking at him, for his eyes had taken in more or less of the brackish water of the river; but he shook his head in the negative. This relieved Jack more than a little. Like Josh, he had been hoping that in the very beginning of their new cruise a wet blanket might not be cast over the spirits of the party by their witnessing the drowning of a poor chap.

"Here comes the tug down after us," remarked Jimmy. "I suppose the omadhauns 'll be expressing their regrets for the accident. Sure, it was criminal carelessness, if ever there was a case. And ye'll be silly, sor, if so be ye don't make 'em pay for the boat they smashed."

By degrees the man seemed to come out of the half stupor into which his sudden immersion in the waters of the river had thrown him.

"They just got to," he grumbled, shaking his head; "for 'twas a borrowed boat, an' I can't pay for a new one."

"We'll try and see you through," said Jack.

"If they think we're ready to tell what we saw, they'll not only pay you good damages, but take you ashore in the bargain."

"That's the ticket!" declared Jimmy, quite taken with the idea of frightening the captain of the tug into doing the right thing by his victim.

Presently the tug came alongside, and an anxious voice called out:

"Was he much hurt, boys? I'm sorry it happened. Second accident of the week, and such things don't do a man's reputation as a pilot any good."

"Well," replied Jack, promptly, "suppose you whack up for his boat, and a suit of clothes for the man; then take him ashore, and none of us will say a word about the accident, as you call it, but which looked mighty like criminal carelessness to us."

There was a brief interval of silence, during which the two men in the wheel-house of the tug seemed to be conferring.

"How much does he want, my lad?" asked one, presently thrusting his head and shoulders out, so that Jack could have almost shaken hands had he wished.

"The boat ought to be worth fifteen dollars; and say ten more to get him a new suit. That's

letting you down easy, my friend," called the skipper of the *Tramp*.

"Oh, well, I guess I'll have to stand it, though I don't believe the old tub was worth five. Here you are, bub; and if you chuck the feller across to us, we'll dry him off, and land him somewhere above."

Jack eagerly took the proffered bills, and thrust them into the hand of the man who had been so happily rescued.

"Here you are, and good luck to you," he said, cheerily. "Do you think you can get aboard the tug now, my man?"

The other had gripped the several bank bills eagerly; but at the same time a look of caution came into his eyes.

"Say, mister, can't you manage to drop me ashore somewhere below here?" he asked, in a hoarse whisper.

"Well, it wouldn't be altogether convenient," replied Jack, hesitating; and then as he saw the pilot of the tugboat watching them, with a grin on his face, a sudden realization as to what the rescued man feared broke in upon him.

"They might make me give it back again, ye see, after I got dried off," continued the poor fellow, who evidently had not held so much money in his hand for many a long day.

"By George! that's so!" Nick was heard to exclaim; for the *Wireless* had crept up, and now lay right alongside the *Tramp*.

Jack was quick to make a decision, and as a rule his first thought was the right one, too.

"I'll land you myself!" he declared, sturdily; "it won't take much time. And I guess a good deed done in the beginning of the voyage ought to bring us luck to pull out of many a bad hole."

Then raising his voice and addressing the man at the wheel of the tug, Jack continued:

"We'll set him ashore below, Captain. You see, he doesn't want to ride up to the city; neither do you prefer to have him go. It's all right; we'll say nothing of what we saw to anybody. So long, Capain!"

And without waiting for an answer Jack simply started his motor, upon which the *Tramp* shot away from the tug. Looking back, Jack saw the two men conferring, but he felt sure they would allow things to rest.

"That negligence cost him twenty-five dollars, you see, Jimmy; and perhaps he'll keep his eyes about him after this, when he's on the move. It's lucky for him, as well as for our friend here, that a human life was not snuffed out in the bargain."

"And do we head for the shore now, Jack?" queried the mate and cook.

"As soon as I find out which side the wrecked mariner wants to land on," replied the skipper, turning to his passenger.

"Just suit yourself, sir," spoke up the man, into whose face the color was once more beginning to creep, as he looked frequently at the wad of greenbacks, which he continued to caress with his fingers, as though the very feel of them did his heart good.

"But which side do you live on?" persisted Jack, wishing to do the best he could for the fellow.

"Well, now, I live over in Jersey, near Bridgeport," said the man; "but I was goin' across to Lamokin in Pennsylvania, on a chance to get work. So if you'll put me ashore anywhere below here, I can walk up the railroad track to the junction."

Jack immediately headed shoreward.

"Take things easy, fellows, and we'll catch up with you before you've gone many miles," he called out to those in the other boats, since there seemed no necessity for all of them to leave the middle of the river just to land one man.

It was no trouble to get close in on the Pennsylvania shore; the case might have been

different over in Jersey, where they could see that marshland abounded at this point.

"Here you are; just step ashore on that rock; and good luck with you, friend!" Jack sang out, as Jimmy piloted the boat alongside a section of the shore, using his favorite boat-hook in so doing.

"Shake hands first, please, young sir," said the other, who appeared to be a decent working man, for his palms were calloused with toil. "You sure done me a mighty good turn this day. I might a-died out there, only for the way you come to the rescue. I won't forget it in a hurry, I tell you."

"Well, pass it along then," laughed Jack, grasping the other's hand at the same time. "Perhaps you'll run across some poor chap who's worse off than you are. Give him a helping hand, and we'll call the thing squared."

"I will, just as sure as I live, I will, that. It's a good idea, too. And after gettin' me this money, I reckon ye saved it for me, by takin' me ashore. That tugboat captain looked like he'd a-made me fork over agin, once he had me aboard his craft."

"I wouldn't be surprised if you were right," assented Jack. "Shake hands with Jimmy too, while you're about it, friend. He yanked

you in like a good fellow. If your life was saved, Jimmy had a hand in it."

After this ceremony had been carried out, the man managed to get ashore. Then the boathook was brought into use again to push off; and a minute or two later they were chugging along down-stream, heading once more toward the middle of the broadening river.

Jimmy waved to the man several times, until finally they lost sight of him as he gained the railroad track, and started north.

"Anyway, that was a good beginning, Jimmy," remarked Jack, in a satisfied tone.

"It sure was, for that bog-trotter," chuckled the other. "His ould boat wasn't worth more'n five dollars, as the tug captain sez, an' here he sells it for three toimes the sum. His clothes'll be dry on his back before an hour, in this warm sun; an' he has a noice tin dollars to buy new garments wid. It's the luckiest day av his life, so it is."

"Well, I rather think that adventure did net him a cool twenty," laughed Jack. "Not so bad for a dip in the river."

"He naded a bath, too, so he did," declared Jimmy. "An, mark my word, he'd be willing to kape it up all the blissed day at the same price, so he would. Now we're safe out from

the rocks along the shore, why not hit her up, an' overhaul the rist av the bunch, Jack?"

"Right you are, and here goes," sang out the other. "Take the wheel, Jimmy, and look out for anything in the way. I want to watch how the engine works. You know, George wasn't the only one who overhauled his motor after our fun this last summer."

"She is makin' better toime than she iver did in her whole blissed life!" cried the delighted Jimmy, presently, after Jack had been working at the engine a spell. "Be the powers! I do belave we kin give George a race for his money nixt toime he challenges us, so I do. Hurroo! we're flyin' over the wather, Jack!"

"Less talk, and keep your eyes in front of you!" called the other. "If you get as careless as that tugboat man, we'll be smashing into something, too. And then good-bye to all our hopes for a jolly voyage down the coast."

"Aw! 'tis me that is boring the wather with me eyes all the toime, Jack dear; and never a thing as could escape me aigle vision. I'm a broth of bhoy when it comes to steering a boat, do ye mind."

The stream was wide, and there were far less vessels moving up or down than had been the case above, so that, just as Jimmy de-

clared, it was an easy job to keep clear of obstructions.

Jack had become intensely interested in the splendid working of his reconstructed motor. He was watching its pulsations, and experimenting in many little ways, in order to find out just how to get the maximum of speed from it.

And then, all at once, he heard Jimmy give utterance to an exclamation that might be freighted with either curiosity or alarm—perhaps both.

Hardly knowing what to expect, the skipper of the little *Tramp* struggled to his knees, and then drew himself erect, to make a discovery that thrilled him through and through.

CHAPTER III.

JACK TAKES A HYDRO-AEROPLANE MESSAGE.

"Oh! murder! what a big birrd!" Jimmy was crying out.

A shadow had fallen upon the water close by, and the distant cries of the other young motor boat boys could be faintly heard. Jack, looking hastily up, saw a strange thing that had extended wings like a monster bird, apparently swooping down toward the surface of the wide river.

Of course he knew that it was an up-to-date flying machine, and the presence of aluminum pontoons under the body of the contrivance also told him that for the first time in his life he was looking at a hydro-aeroplane, capable of alighting on the water and starting up again, after the manner of a wild duck.

Even as the two in the *Tramp* stared, the queer contrivance skipped along the surface of the Delaware, sending the water in spray on either side. Then it seemed to settle contentedly there, not ten feet away from the motor boat.

There was a young fellow squatted in the seat where the various levers could be con-

trolled. He was dressed after some odd fancy of his own, calculated to serve in the cool air of the upper strata. To Jimmy the vision was very startling.

"Why, say, it's a real birdman after all, Jack!" he cried, as though he had only discovered this remarkable fact after the machine had come to a stop close by.

The aviator laughed aloud.

"What did you think it was, young fellow, an old-time roc come back to life?" he called out, waving a hand at them cheerfully.

Jack had shut off the engine at the time he heard the first exclamation from his teammate, and at this time they were hardly more than moving with the ebb tide, so that in reality the boat drew closer to the hydroaeroplane with each passing second.

"You gave us a little start, that's all," laughed Jack. "Of course, I knew what it was as soon as I saw the pontoons underneath. They seem to do the trick first rate, too. Seems to me I'd like to sail in one of those things, if I ever had the chance."

"It's a great experience, all right," replied the aviator; "but the way things are going right now, only a very few fellows are fitted for the work. But are you in company with

those other two jolly little boats way off yonder?"

"That's right," sang out Jimmy, determined to have his little say with the bold navigator of the upper currents; "we're all chums, an' it's the Motor Boat Club we do be represinting. Along the coast we're bound, on a long cruise, by the same token."

The young fellow appeared interested at once.

"Say, that's nice," he remarked. "I bet you'll have a bully good time of it, too. Headed up or down, may I ask?"

He sat there, as much at his ease as though on an ocean steamer, instead of a frail little machine that sprawled upon the heaving waves very much as Jack had seen a big "darning needle," known also as a "mosquito hawk," do on occasion.

"Florida, by the inside route, and then perhaps along the gulf to New Orleans," replied the skipper of the *Tramp,* in as careless a voice as he could command, just as though a voyage that might cover a thousand or two miles was hardly worth mentioning.

The owner of the hydro-aeroplane whistled, to indicate his surprise. His whole manner showed the keen interest he immediately took in such a glorious prospect; and Jack guessed

instantly from this that he possessed the true love for outdoor life and sport.

"That's simply immense," remarked the other, with what might seem like an envious sigh. "I can see where your little crowd have a mighty fine time ahead. Wish I could get off to accompany you; but even if I had an invite, my contracts with the company would not allow me. But later on I am to give some exhibitions in the South; and wouldn't it be strange now if we happened to meet up with each other again?"

Jack rather liked his looks, and of course immediately expressed the hope that circumstances might throw them together again some fine day.

"I'd be glad to see more of you, and learn something about your experiences, for ten to one you've seen some rough times in your air journeys," he remarked, as he leaned on the side of the *Tramp's* cabin, and let his wondering eyes travel over the peculiar mechanism of the queer air and water craft combined.

"Well, rather," smiled the other, nodding his head in a friendly way, as though possibly he had been taken just as much by the frank and fearless face of the motor boat skipper as Jack was by his countenance and bearing.

"Might I ask what your names are, in case we ever do run together again?"

He had a notebook and pencil in his hands while speaking, and Jack quite willing to oblige, called off the roster of the Motor Boat Club, with the names of the three craft included.

"This is a great pleasure to me, I give you my word, Jack," remarked the young fellow, as he thrust the memorandum book once more in his pocket. "Never dreamed of such good luck when I took a notion to swoop down, and see what three bully little craft were doing, headed for Delaware Bay. Going all the way to Florida, you say; and by the inside passage, too? I wonder, now, would that happen to take you in the neighborhood of Beaufort, North Carolina?"

An eager expression had suddenly flashed across his face, and Jack saw his eyes sparkle, as with anticipation; though for the life of him he could not understand just why this should be so, unless the said Beaufort happened to have been the home port of the hydro-aeroplane flier, and the mere thought of their being in that vicinity gave him a homesick thrill.

"Why, yes, I remember that I've got Beaufort marked on the chart as one of our stop-

ping places," Jack hastened to reply. "Could I do anything for you while there? I'd be quite willing to oblige you—er, by the way, you haven't told us your name in return for having ours!"

"That's a fact, I haven't," he replied, quickly, but Jack thought with just a trifle of embarrassment; "it's Malcolm Spence."

"Oh! I believe I've read a lot about your doings with one of these air and water fliers. There were some pretty stirring accounts of your trips in the papers out our way not long ago!" Jack exclaimed, looking at the young fellow with considerable admiration; since hero worship has just as strong a hold upon the human heart in these modern days as in times of old, when knights went forth to do battle with dragons, and all kinds of terrible monsters.

"I believe they have been showing me up, more or less; but I try to avoid those newspaper men all I can, because they stretch things so," young Spence modestly remarked. "That's why I come down here to try out any new little wrinkle I may happen to have hit on. A week ago I started off the deck of a Government war vessel, a big cruiser, went up a thousand feet, dropped to the water, and last of all landed again in the same place from which

I started—all to prove how valuable a hydro-aeroplane would be in case of real war."

"Yes, I was reading about that while we were on the way here, but somehow didn't remember the name of the one who had done it," Jack went on, while the little motor boat and the new-fangled contraption that seemed perfectly at home in the air or floating on the waves kept company on the tide of the river.

"Did I understand you to say that you would be willing to do me a little favor, if it didn't put you to much inconvenience?" asked Spence, his voice trembling with an eagerness that Jack could not help noticing.

"Certainly we will, if it lies in our power," he answered promptly.

"They never was a more obliging gossoon in the wide worrld than this same Jack Stormways, and ye can depind on that!" exploded Jimmy, thinking it about time he injected his personality into the conversation, since he did not wish to be an utter nonentity.

Malcolm Spence thrust a hand into his tightly buttoned leather coat. When he brought it out Jack saw that it held what looked like a small packet, which, after all, might be a letter, though it was sealed.

"I wanted to get this to a party by the name of Van Arsdale Spence," he said, hurriedly,

as though afraid that they might back out after all from their kind proposition; "but I knew he no longer lived in Beaufort, and I had no means of finding his present address. So, instead of mailing it, I have carried the thing around with me for three weeks, intending when I went South to make inquiries and send it to his new address, if so be he was far away."

"All right, then," declared Jack, stretching out his hand promptly; "I'll promise to do everything in my power to get it into his possession. Failing, you must give me some address through which I can reach you, to tell you it was no go."

"Here's my card, with the address of the makers of this machine. A letter will always get to me if sent in their care, because, you see, I'm under a three years' contract to exhibit this invention, and add new ideas of my own. But I do hope you may be able to find the party. I'd like that packet to fall into his hands as soon as possible. Too much time has already been lost. Please keep it safe, will you, Jack?"

The skipper of the *Tramp* accepted the little packet in a serious manner that no doubt impressed the other favorably.

"Depend on me to do my level best for you;

that's all any fellow could promise, Mr. Spence," he said, simply, as he stowed the article away in an inside pocket of his coat.

"Shake hands, please, both of you!" exclaimed the birdman, heartily, stretching across the little gap that separated him from the motor boat; "I only wish it had been my good fortune to meet up with you earlier."

The formality of shaking hands was concluded with more or less difficulty, owing to the fact that the wings of the aeroplane extended far on either side, and kept the boat off; but in the end they managed fairly well, though the eager Jimmy came near falling overboard in his ambitious stretching, deeming it a great honor to have pressed the hand of one about whom there was so much being printed in the papers.

"Good luck go with you, boys!" called out the young aviator, as he prepared to once more leave the surface of the water, and soar aloft into airy space. "Give my regards to Herbert, Josh, George and Nick, and tell them I hope some day in the near future to make their personal acquaintance. I'm sure you must be a jolly bunch; and what glorious times you have ahead! And I also hope you get track of the party that packet is addressed to, Jack; it means much to me, I tell you."

"I'll do everything in my power to find him, and give it personally into his hands, Malcolm, I promise you. Shall I tell him how queerly we met?" Jack went on.

"Yes, and how some blessed inspiration caused me to believe there was more than accident about our coming together, with you just on the way down South by the coast route. So long, fellows; and again the best of luck to you all."

"Same to you!" called Jimmy, as he heard the motor of the hydro-aeroplane begin to whirr, and saw the strange contrivance start to spin along the little waves, once more sending the spray on either side.

Then it began to rise in the air with perfect freedom. They saw the daring young aviator wave his hand in parting as he sped away, circling upwards until he was hundreds of feet aloft, and constantly gaining.

"Wow! wouldn't that make ye wink, now, Jack darlint?" exclaimed Jimmy, as he twisted his neck badly in the endeavor to follow the course of the wonderful machine that seemed as much at home in one element as the other.

Jack made no reply.

He was bending down to start his own motor once more, and upon his face there might have

been seen an expression that told of mingled resolution and curiosity. Yes, he would do everything possible to deliver this strange missive that Malcolm Spence had entrusted to his care, apparently on the impulse of the moment; at the same time Jack would not have been human, and a boy, had he not experienced more or less wonder as to what that same communication might contain.

But the mystery was one that must remain such to the end of the chapter, since the deep sense of honor that always went with his actions would positively prevent his trying to ascertain what that sealed packet contained.

"Hey! get busy there, Jimmy!" he called out; "we're going to start again, and make for the other boats. They've pulled up, and are waiting for us to join them. And, believe me, those fellows are just eating their heads off with envy, because they must have seen that we were hobnobbing with a real birdman, who could scoot along the water as easily as a flying-fish. All ready, are you? Then here she goes, Jimmy," and immediately the merry hum of the motor sounded.

CHAPTER IV.

THE FIRST CAMPFIRE ASHORE.

"Ahoy there, *Tramp!* What's all this mean?"

That was George hailing through his megaphone, as Jack and Jimmy drew near the spot where the other boats were waiting.

Jack simply waved his hand, to indicate that all in good time the other fellows would hear the news; and that he did not mean to strain his voice shouting across a stretch of water, when there was no necessity.

Presently the three craft were moving along abreast, down the river, and only a little distance apart. It might be noticed that while the *Wireless* hung on the starboard quarter, the *Comfort* was just as near on the port side; and thus conversation was made easy.

"Now spin us the yarn, partner," spoke up impatient George, who did everything in a hurry, though a mighty good comrade all the same.

"Yes," broke in Nick, who was also in the same narrow boat, as usual gripping the sides, as though to steady his fat form; "believe me, fellows, we're consumed with curiosity to

know what that chap in the aeroplane wanted with you."

"Say," came from the lanky Josh, squatted in the roomy *Comfort,* with his long legs doubled up under him, after the manner of a Turk; "what d'ye think, Jack, Nick here kinder expected to see you toddle aboard that hydroplane, and take a spin up among the clouds. Said 'twould be just like your luck to get hold of such a bully chance."

"Well, hardly," laughed Jack. "But we did make the acquaintance of a pretty fine young fellow, the same we've been reading about so much lately—Malcolm Spence."

"Oh, say! why couldn't we have been along?" grunted George, disconsolately; "for if ever there was a fellow I'd give a heap to meet up with, he's the one. It's a shame, next door to a crime, that we got left out of the deal. But go on, Jack, old chum, and tell us all he said."

Jack accordingly proceeded to do so. He was frequently interrupted by Jimmy, who fancied that he was neglecting some important feature of the story. Between them everything was presently told. And the other four hung upon the narration to the last word.

"Let's see that queer old packet, Jack," said Herb.

"That's so; give us a squint at it, anyhow," Nick demanded.

So the skipper of the *Tramp* took the letter out carefully and held it up.

"Excuse me for not passing it around, fellows," he remarked, "but I gave my word it shouldn't go out of my possession until I'd found the party mentioned. From the way the young chap acted, I guess it must be more or less valuable, to him and this same party, anyhow."

"What is the name on the envelope—you can tell me that, can't you?" asked Josh.

"Van Arsdale Spence," replied the bearer of the missive, as he just as carefully replaced it in his pocket.

"Hey! that's the same last name as his, ain't it?" remarked George.

"Spence—yes, and it may be some relation of his, perhaps a brother or father. But, fellows, that's none of our business, remember. Now, let's talk of other things, and forget that little adventure for a time."

Jack generally had his way, and in this case his chums realized that he was certainly right. So they started talking about their immediate plans for the first night out.

"We'll go ashore if we can, boys, and build a rousing fire," said Nick, whose one great de-

light, outside of eating, was seeing a bonfire burn; and, indeed, he always declared some of his remote ancestors must have been real fire worshippers.

"Yes, that would be a good idea," Jack admitted. "There's no telling how often on this trip we'll find ourselves forced to eat and sleep aboard, so when the opportunity offers we might as well get out to stretch our legs."

"Great scheme," declared Josh, who, being considerably longer than any one of his shipmates, suffered more in consequence of cramped quarters.

"Only one thing wrong," grunted Nick, shaking his head.

"I can guess he's thinking of eating right now," flashed Josh, who knew the symptoms in his companion only too well.

"Well, Mister Smarty, for once you hit the nail on the head," grinned the fat boy. "I just happened to think of something we hadn't ought to have forgotten to fetch along for our first meal."

"What was that?" demanded Jack.

"Why, when I looked over that list of things you got up, Jack, blessed if there was anything else I could think of," said George; "but it takes my mate here to have 'em all in his mind, even if he can't cook like Josh."

"Let's hear what we forgot, then, Nick!" demanded Herb.

"Oysters!" immediately cried the other, triumphantly. "This is the country for the delicious bivalve, I understand, and the season is on. I'd made up my mind some time ago, when this trip was first planned, that I was going to have lots of feasts in that line. When a fellow lives away back on the Mississippi River he gets mighty few chances for real fresh oysters, you know, and I do love 'em so much!"

"And a few more things in the bargain," chuckled Josh, who never could resist a chance to get in a sly dig at his friend.

"Lots of 'em," replied the stout boy, calmly, and without a blush.

"But I thought you understood all about that," remarked Jack. "We expect to pick up all the oysters we want on the way, so there was no use laying in a supply at the start, when we needed room for more important stores."

"Depend on it, Nick, you'll get all the bivalves you want before we're through with this cruise," Herb prophesied.

"Bring 'em on, then," boasted Nick. "I'm ready to tackle a mountain of 'em right off the reel, in the shell or out. Never believed I

could get enough oysters. But about what time do we go ashore, boys?"

"He's getting hungry already, I do believe?" cried Josh. "Honest, now, to keep that fellow from complaining, there ought to be a bag of crackers and cheese hung up all the time within his reach, so he could take a snack every hour or two. I reckon those fat legs of his'n must be hollow, for how else could he stow away all the grub he does? He's a regular Oliver Twist, calling for more, more!"

Nick took all this in the best of humor. He even grinned, just as though he might look on it as some sort of compliment.

"I guess I was born hungry, and never got over the complaint," he observed; "but that don't answer my question, Jack. It's near four o'clock, right now, and it gets dark not a great while after six, you know."

"All right, then; in about another hour we'll think of looking up a creek along the shore, and make a snug harbor. Then for a fire, and a supper, the first of the new cruise," the skipper of the *Tramp* replied.

"Hear! hear! only another hour to wait," declared Nick, waving his hat exultantly.

"Think you can hold out that long?" demanded Josh.

"I'll try," said Nick, meekly, as he drew an

apple from one of his pockets, and proceeded to calmly munch the same.

"I give you my word, boys," said George, solemnly, "that's the seventh he's bit into since we left the dock. Two did for me; and I can see still more bunching up in his pockets. If he gets faint, I'll hand him a cracker box to open. But I've some hopes the apples will be a life preserver."

Jack presently began to increase the speed of the flotilla. He wanted to get as far down the river as possible before being compelled to put up for the night. And having glanced at his charts, he knew that they must cover a number of miles ere they reached a tributary flowing into the Delaware at this point.

Five o'clock came around at last. Josh remarked that he was pleased to see Nick still holding out, and that he had not wasted away to a mere shadow.

"Now we head in toward the western shore, and keep our eyes on the lookout for the mouth of a creek that ought to be along down here," Jack called out, as he began to gradually alter the course of his boat.

Of course, this pleased them quite a little, as marking a change in the monotony of the afternoon run. And truth to tell, Nick was

not the only fellow who enjoyed looking forward to supper time beside a roaring fire.

"Hey! that looks like an opening below us, Jack!" called George, who was in the bow of the *Wireless,* steering, leaving to Nick the duty of attending to other matters connected with the management of the speed boat, especially its balance.

"You're right, George, that's just what it is, the mouth of the creek; so slow up everybody, and we'll go in."

Impetuous George was the first to turn into the tributary. After running up a short distance, the prospect for a camp not improving, Jack called out :

"It looks as if it might get worse instead of better, so let's stop off here. There are a few trees anyway, and we can get all the wood we need. Head in, George, and make a landing."

Presently all of them stepped ashore. Although their surroundings did not appeal very heartily to lads accustomed to dense timber, with all that implies, still they knew how to make the best of a bad bargain.

Nick began to gather firewood at once, and some of the others helped, so that in a brief time a fire was started that at least made things look a bit more comfortable and home-

like, as Nick said, while puffing like a porpoise in his labors.

The cruisers had been securely tied up, since there was no danger of any storm out on the river dashing them against the shore in this peaceful harbor.

Having brought the mess chests ashore, together with what cooking things they needed, the boys began preparations for supper. Many hands make light work, and Jack utilized every one for some purpose. Some laid in a supply of wood, others opened cans, while Josh, being the boss cook of the crowd, took charge of the menu.

Meanwhile night began to settle around them, and with the coming darkness a swarm of insect pests developed.

"Whoop!" cried Nick, as he made his fat arms swing around his head like a couple of old-time flails; "what d'ye call all this, tell me? Every time I open my mouth a dozen hop right in. Talk to me about skeeters, these must be the frisky Jersey brand we've heard so much about."

"Say, it's lucky Jack thought to get nets for us all in Philadelphia," remarked Herb, as he too waved the invaders aside when they harried him.

"No sleeping ashore for me here," declared George. "The varmints would carry a fellow off bodily, I do believe."

A little breeze springing up caused the insects to drop into the grass again, so that the boys had some peace. Supper being ready, they finally sat around, and started to partake of the first meal of the great cruise.

As they were furiously hungry of course everything tasted just splendid; but then it was good without any starvation sauce to tempt them, for Josh had always proved a remarkably clever cook, even though caring so little himself for eating.

After the edge of their appetites had been taken off, the six boys began to chat and joke. Josh was pleased to get a chance to sing one of his little ditties, and required very little urging, after the meal was over, and the things cleared away.

It was mighty nice, sitting there in comfortable attitudes, listening to Josh sing, and with the flames jumping up as Nick threw another armful of fuel on the fire. Now and then one of them would make a hurried slap at some over-strenuous mosquito that insisted on having his meal, too; but, taken in all, the boys were enjoying it tremendously.

"When does the moon show up?" asked Herb, after a time.

"Why, it's already up there in the west, and a fair-sized crescent, too," remarked Jack. "Each night it'll get bigger, until we have it full. That's the time I like most of all, when she hangs up there like a big round shield, and the waves dance as if they were made of silver."

"Listen to Jack getting poetical!" laughed George.

"Well, who wouldn't, when you can hear the lap of the little waves out there on the creek?" replied Jack, instantly. "And there, that must have been a fish jumping, the way they told us the mullet do down South."

"Yes," said Nick, "me to get one of those castnets, and pull 'em in at every throw. No danger of a fellow getting hungry in that country, I guess."

"If you didn't get hungry where would be the pleasure in living, tell me that?" demanded Josh.

Before Nick could frame any reply there suddenly broke out the most terrible roaring sound any of the boys had ever heard. It seemed to come from right off the surface of the dark creek close by, and gave poor Nick such a fright that he almost fell into the fire

upon attempting to struggle to his feet, such was his clumsiness when excited.

All of them forgot the comfort they had been enjoying, and scrambled erect.

CHAPTER V.

A STORM, AND NO REFUGE IN SIGHT.

It was only natural that every one of the little party of cruisers should feel their hearts beating much faster than ordinary, as they were so startled by that horrible blast so near at hand.

But Jack believed he had heard another sound close on the heels of the first, and which was not unlike a hoarse laugh. That indicated the presence of human beings; and, of course, would account for the roar that had disturbed their first camp ashore.

Looking in the direction from whence the sounds had apparently proceeded, which was just below where their boats were pulled up, he could just manage to make out some bulky moving object; then the whipping of what seemed to be a discolored sail caught his eye, and he understood.

Of course, it must be some boat, possibly belonging to oystermen who plied their trade out on the bay, close to which they now found themselves.

Coming into the creek, which was possibly their regular harbor for night refuge, and

discovering the fire as well as the boys, they had blown a fog horn just in the spirit of frolic, to give the boys a scare.

Both men were laughing now at the success of their scheme, and one of them called out, with the idea of calming the bunch before they took to shooting, in their excitement, as greenhorns were liable to do under such conditions.

"Hey, there! it's all right, boys; we're just oystermen, ye see, an' meanin' to come ashore to jine ye, 'fore we goes home. Got a dock a leetle ways up-creek. So hold yer guns, boys; no harm done, I reckons!"

The sloop was run up on the sandy shore and both men jumped off. They proved to be honest chaps, and soon the boys were quite relieved of their first suspicious sensation at sight of such rough customers.

These fellows had seldom looked on such dainty tricks as the three little motor boats. Accustomed to heavy craft, they shook their heads when they heard how Jack and his chums expected to make far distant Florida in such frail boats.

"Never kin do it, boys, an' I knows it," declared the taller fellow.

"But ye got the grit, all right, I reckons," added the other.

"We expect to meet up with lots of trouble on the way," said Jack; "but then we've been through some experience, and know a little about managing these things. Often a boat like mine will live in a sea that would swamp a more clumsy craft. A canoe rides the waves like a duck, where a rowboat would fill and sink, being logy."

"They may be somethin' in that same," remarked one of the oystermen; "but the chanct is, ye'll never make the riffle, boys. I hate to say that same; but right down in this Delaware Bay they's bad spots where ye kin git caught out in a blow, an' can't land. Many a fine boat's gone down as I know of."

"An' if so be ye do make shore they's hard characters all along that section. Look out if ye happens to land near Murderkill Creek, that's all I kin say," his mate spoke up, quite seriously, for they seemed to have taken something of an interest in the boys, and their ambitious plans.

"Goodness gracious! did you ever hear such a terrible name as that?" gasped Nick, looking pale, as his imagination worked overtime in picturing the dreadful things apt to be met with in a country where even the creeks bore such suggestive names.

"Oh, sometimes things turn out less terrible

than they seem!" laughed Jack, who had read something about this same creek, and felt no particular fear about making a camp along its border, should necessity compel such a thing.

"Now, we got to be goin' home, 'case we got famblies waitin' for us; but we'll toss a lot o' oysters ashore here, if so be ye'd like to have 'em," the taller man remarked.

"All right," spoke up Nick, so promptly that Jack was unable to get in a reply; "give us fifty cents' worth, if that'll buy a bushel. I feel like I could eat that many myself. Yum, yum, just think of the luck, fellows!"

The men laughed, but took the money, since their business was gathering the bivalves, and there were doubtless many mouths to feed. And they certainly tossed a full bushel ashore before pushing off, to continue their run up the stream, to the dock they spoke of owning.

Nick had galloped over to the *Wireless,* and was heard rummaging about at a tremendous rate, all the while lamenting the fact that he could not find what he was so eagerly searching for.

"Oh, George! where did you ever hide that bully new oyster knife I bought up in Philadelphia?" he bellowed, as he raised his head above the side of the speed boat.

"Never touched it," answered the other,

promptly. "But I do remember seeing some such thing in that locker up in the bow, where the tools are kept."

A triumphant squeal presently announced that Nick had unearthed his treasure; and over the side he came, making at once for the heap of bivalves.

"You want to go slow with those things," warned Herb.

"Oh, rats! I guess I know my capacity!" scoffed the fat boy, starting to rap a shell smartly, and then insert the end of the knife between its two jaws. "When I get enough I'll hold up."

"You bet you will before you reach that point!" declared George, "because some of us hanker after oysters, too. But just remember how you cut your fingers with the shells the time we were down at New Orleans. And be careful: they may not hurt much now, but tomorrow they'll fair set you wild, boy."

Nick only mumbled in reply. He was stuffing the first fat oyster into his mouth, and as this was an extra large specimen, it allowed of no room for words.

The others soon got busy too, using such implements as they could find among the tools. Jack had a regular oyster knife, but none of

the others had thought to provide themselves with such a necessary article, save Nick alone.

But by degrees they tamed the oyster fiend, and would not let him have any more. Jimmy borrowed his knife, and amused himself in disposing of the juicy contents of numerous shells. And Josh, after swallowing several himself, proved to be a public benefactor by opening them for those who were green at the business.

But after a time they cried quits, and began to think of going aboard again; for the venomous little pests were beginning to be very active, and kept them all busy slapping right and left.

Once under their nets they found a solid comfort that fully compensated them for not being able to sleep ashore.

And so the night passed. Nothing occurred to disturb them; and yet despite the calm, it is doubtful whether any of the six slept very well. The novelty of once more being away from civilization and starting on a long cruise that might bring all sorts of adventures in its train, kept them wakeful.

Doubtless, too, memory carried them back to many scenes connected with past experiences; and they lived again in the various happenings marking those halcyon days.

Up with the dawn some of them once more went ashore. The fire was started afresh and preparations for breakfast were under way by the time Nick made his appearance. He surveyed what was being done for a little time, and then lifted his voice in protest:

"What! no oysters for breakfast? That's mighty funny, now. I expected to have 'em every meal, you know."

Not getting any satisfaction from Josh, who was busy making some batter for the camp flapjacks, Nick wandered off. They soon heard him hard at work on oyster shells, though an occasional grunt told that he had cut his tender fingers with the sharp points.

He did succeed in opening a few, which he insisted on cooking for his own breakfast; and Josh let him have his way; but it might have been noticed that Nick consumed his full share of the batter cakes; and even wistfully eyed a last one belonging to the cook, upon which Josh generously passed it along, saying that he was "full up."

If any one ever saw Nick in that condition it did not readily occur to them, for the fat boy seemed to be built after the style of an omnibus, with always room for "just one more," with crowding.

"Looks like a good day ahead," remarked Herb, glancing at the sky.

"I was just thinking the other way," spoke up Jack.

"Eh? What makes you tell us that, after hearing what those oystermen said about the danger we'd run, if we were caught in the big bay in a storm?" asked George; for his narrow-beam boat always threatened to turn turtle when the waves were very boisterous, and it kept him guessing continually.

"Oh! well, I may be wrong; but I didn't altogether like the looks of those mottled clouds as the sun was coming up," Jack remarked.

"And it was red, too, which I understand is always a bad sign," Nick put in. "If we could only get another lot of shell fish, I'd vote to stay right here for the day. Perhaps things would pick up by tomorrow."

"Rats! Who's afraid?" laughed Josh, who knew he was sure of lots of comfort aboard the roomy boat belonging to Herb.

It was, however, put to a vote, because Jack believed in majority ruling in matters affecting the whole crowd. Nick himself voted in favor of going on. Whether he did this because he was ashamed to show the white feather, or from fear lest they might not be

able to secure a further supply of oysters, none of them ever really knew. But the motion to continue the cruise was carried unanimously.

As they issued forth from the creek they found that the river seemed much wider than they had believed it to be. And apparently it would keep on that way, with the shores drawing further apart, until they found themselves on Delaware Bay, which in parts, Jack understood, to be something like twenty-five miles from side to side, an ocean in fact, for such small craft.

"We must have been camping in Delaware last night, eh, Jack?" called out Herb, as the three boats ran along side by side, even George curbing his propensity for rushing ahead.

"Sure we did," spoke up George. "I found out on the chart where we stopped. Look away over there in Jersey, and you'll see a cloud of smoke hovering over Salem. How about that, Jack; am I correct?"

"That's Salem, all right; and we've got to start at a better pace than this if we hope to get anywhere before night. Hit her up, George, and we'll do the best we can to follow," Jack answered.

This pleased the jaunty skipper of the *Wireless* first-rate. He always liked to lead the procession, and set the pace for the rest.

So, as the morning wore on, they made good progress. Of course the others were compelled to tone down their speed to suit the pace of the old *Comfort,* that just wallowed along in what George called a "good natured way." Boat and skipper were very much alike; but then that similarity also applied in the cases of George and his speed boat; yes, and with regard to Jack, too, who united the good qualities of both other skippers, as his craft did those of stability and speed.

At noon they ate a lunch while still booming along; for Jack had discovered a bank of clouds coming up in the west that he did not just fancy, and hoped to make a certain point before the storm, if such there was in store for them, should break.

"What's this mean, Jack?" asked George, a couple of hours later, falling back somewhat so that he might exchange words with the others.

"Yes," said Herb at that; "it's getting as dark as the mischief. Guess we're going to have that storm Jack prophesied this morning, fellows."

"Say, perhaps I'd better be shooting ahead, then," suggested George, uneasily. "You know this cranky boat of mine isn't the nicest thing going, to be in when the waves are rolling

ten feet high. And it's so wide here, they'll beat that, in a pinch."

"What would you be after going ahead for, then?" asked Jimmy.

"So as to get to that creek with the lovely name we talked about," George replied, looking troubled, nevertheless. "I noted its position on the chart, and think I might find it."

"But if the storm caught you beforehand, you'd be in a bad pickle, George!" declared Jack, soberly. "No, better all keep together. Then, if an accident happens, there's some chance for the others lending a helping hand. But we'll head in more toward the Delaware side, though if the wind strikes us from the east it'll be a bad place to be caught on a lee shore."

Nothing more was said just then. They changed their course somewhat, and the three little motor boats continued to push steadily forward. Meanwhile the gloom seemed to gather around them, until even stout-hearted Jack shuddered a little as he surveyed the wide stretch of waters that had begun to tumble in the freshening wind, and thought what might happen if they could find no harbor, with a fierce late equinoctial gale sweeping across the dangerous bay.

CHAPTER VI.

A CLOSE SHAVE, BUT NO DAMAGE DONE.

"See any signs of a harbor, Jack?"

It was Nick who called this out, as he watched the skipper of the *Tramp* swing the pair of binoculars he was handling along the shore ahead, while Jimmy had the wheel.

"Not that I could say for certain," replied the other, lowering the glasses for a minute in order to rest his strained eyes. "I was trying to get our bearings; and from several things about the shore, that resemble the line of the chart, I begin to believe I know where we are."

"Not near that awful Murderkill Creek, I hope?" spoke up Nick, shuddering.

"What's the matter with you?" called George. "Any port in a storm, say I; and even if it happened to be Slaughter Creek, which I believe lies further on toward Lewes, I'd grab it in a hurry, if it came along. Don't you go to saying a single word against that sweet harbor. We'll rename it Paradise Creek, if only it serves us this day."

As it was getting darker all the time, no wonder George had begun to feel nervous. Even though he saved himself, and Nick,

should he lose his boat, it would almost break his heart; for in spite of her many and serious faults the jaunty skipper of the erratic *Wireless* fairly loved the craft.

"Yes, we are not many miles above Murderkill; and that or Jones Creek will have to be our destination; for we must have passed the Dona opening by mistake. But perhaps the storm will kindly hold off until we're all snug in a harbor."

While Jack said this, in order to buoy up the downcast chums, deep down in his heart he believed that they were bound to be caught out on that wide stretch of water, and have a fight for their lives, particularly those who were manipulating the tricky speed boat.

But it was useless to ask George to come aboard the *Comfort,* and try to tow his craft. That would seem too ignoble, worse than having a farm wagon drag the broken-down bubble wagon into town, in fact.

They had gone in as near the western shore as prudence dictated. Jack told everybody to be on the lookout for the first sign of an opening. Beggars could not be choosers, and only too gladly would they welcome any port, however ill-named or hard looking.

"She's coming, all right," declared Jimmy, as he crouched there, his hair blowing in the

rising wind, and his eyes taking in every sign of approaching trouble.

"Yes, and I'm sorry to say from the one bad quarter, the southeast," Jack made out to answer, between his set teeth. "If it had only been west, now, we'd have had the shelter of the land, and could have crept along nicely until we got where we wanted to go."

The waves were surely increasing in size, and the small craft began to heave in a very suggestive way. When they grew still larger, under the influence of the rising wind, Jack expected that with the passing of each billow the screw would flash out of water. That was the time to be dreaded; for as resistance suddenly ceased with the passage of the wave, the screw would revolve at lightning speed, and something was apt to go wrong.

Let an accident occur when in such a bad predicament, and it would be all over with the unlucky mariners who chanced to be on the disabled boat.

"Be mighty careful, Herb and George," he called to the others. "Watch each billow, and slow the engine before the screw is exposed. You know what I mean. You've both done the same trick before."

Constant vigilance was to be the price of safety from this moment on. Nothing must

distract the attention of those who manipulated the motors of the three boats caught in this sea in a storm.

Of course, George was accustomed to handling his narrow craft. Few amateurs could have done better than the present skipper. He knew her good qualities to a fraction, and was also acquainted with the bad ones. Consequently, he was aware just how far he could allow her quarter to face the sweep of wind and waves, without being thrown on her beam-ends.

It was a ticklish business, very much like managing a treacherous mule, loaded with kicks and bites at both ends. One little error of judgment, and the result would be a spill that must toss the occupants into the raging waters.

Jack had insisted that the owner of the *Wireless* provide himself with life preservers; each boat carried a couple, but in the case of George and Nick, four had not been deemed too many.

Acting on the advice of Jack, George had fastened one of the cork jackets on himself before the storm really broke; because afterwards he would have no time to spare in attempting such a thing.

Nick had gone him one better; and seemed

to be of huge proportions as he crouched there, waiting for the worst to happen. He had also secured his old White Wings, which had figured quite largely in previous cruises, to his shoulders, as if he hoped and believed that the bags filled with air would be of considerable assistance in keeping him afloat.

Altogether Nick looked next door to a freak escaped from some side show connected with a Barnum and Bailey's circus. Jack often remembered the sight with more or less inward laughter. But it was no time for merriment now, with that wind growing in violence, and the waves assuming a most threatening appearance.

The minutes seemed like hours, so intense was the strain that held them in its terrible grip. Jack had a double duty to perform, watching those onsweeping waves, and at the same time keeping the shore under a close supervision, so that he might discover when they came opposite the mouth of a creek.

Such a place might be so narrow as to pass unnoticed unless one had exceedingly keen eyes; and, moreover, kept up an unremitting watch.

Fortunately they were not fated to experience the worst that might have happened to

them; for the crux of the storm had not come along by any means.

Jack suddenly uttered a yell that startled the others on the laboring boats.

"I saw it, boys; it's all right! Just follow after me; you first, George; and Herb bringing up the rear. Ready now! Here goes!"

As he shouted these words at the top of his voice, for the water was making considerable racket by now, Jack began to head straight for the shore, so that the boat was soon running with the spinning sea.

If he had made a mistake, and the opening failed them, there could be nothing left but to beach their boats, and to try to save themselves from the wreckage as best they might.

But Jack had not made an error of judgment, for presently the others also saw the creek, with its inviting mouth. Even timorous Nick was only too delighted to find a safe harbor from the wild gale to care just then what the name of the creek might happen to be; one was just as good as another to them all.

Jack made the shelter, and George managed to swing in, though his boat did almost go over, being struck on the side by a counter sea, when the pilot was not expecting it, so that she seemed to hang there for a second or two, in the balance.

But Nick rolled to the other side, and this dead weight was sufficient to keep the narrow craft from going completely over; she righted, and swept into the mouth of the creek.

The steady going old *Comfort* came rolling in like a big tub, with Herb and Josh not at all alarmed, such was their faith in the reliable qualities of the staunch craft under their feet. And it might be noticed that Herb's pride in his possession increased in proportion as George's faith decreased. What suited one did not please the other at all, apparently.

Making their way into the creek they tied up, being careful lest they find themselves high and dry at low tide. Jack kept tabs on the state of the tide, and at its flood wanted several more feet under him than while it was at ebb.

"Let us give thanks," said Nick, with due reverence, as they found themselves safe. "That was a nasty little scare, all right. Our old *Wireless* kicked like a bucking broncho; I say that, even though I never rode a cow pony, and only saw the breed at the circus. Oh! I'm glad to be alive right now, and able to eat a few more camp meals!"

No one even called him down for mentioning such a thing as food; for as they had not taken the time to more than munch a few bites at

noon, it stood to reason that everybody was feeling quite sharp set.

"No fire outdoors tonight, fellows, for here comes the rain," said Jack; and even as he spoke the big drops did commence to fall, sending them every one under shelter.

George was hustling in the endeavor to get his tent up, and succeeded in doing so before the rain became very heavy. Both Jack and Herb had had a hunting cabin placed on their boats since last they took a long cruise, for they knew how comfortable such a cover must prove in time of stress and foul weather. But George, believing that to do this would keep his boat out of the speed class, had declined to follow suit, using a tent instead, which was fastened to a ridge pole stretched at night-time fore and aft at a certain height above the cockpit.

Of course, once George had this waterproof canvas covering in place he too was able to laugh at the rain that now poured down. It might not be just as cozy under his flapping canvas as beneath the steady roofs which the other boats boasted; but George would not complain, and Nick dared not.

Of course, every pair now had to cook their own supper. But it was not the first time this

same thing had occurred by any means; and hence they knew just how to go about it.

Each boat was supplied with one of those splendid Juwel kerosene burning gas stoves, which burn common oil turned into a delightful blue flame by the process of a generator. Once this was started, all manner of cooking could be carried on. Indeed, it is simply astonishing how much can be accomplished by means of this clever little device, which most canoeists carry with them as a necessity, as well as a comfort.

The boys had tied up in such a way that they could call out to one another, as the humor seized them. And hence, there was more or less exchange of comments on the bill of fare for supper that evening.

When the meal had been finished night was at hand, though only for the storm no doubt the sun might still have been seen shining in the low west. Jimmy got out his banjo, and the musical plunkety-plunk of its strings, now and then accompanying one of his jolly songs, did much to cheer them up.

Jack busied himself with his charts meanwhile, for there was a nasty little experience awaiting them when they reached Lewes, where they must watch for a favorable opportunity to pass out upon the open Atlantic, and

cover ten miles or so like a covey of frightened partridges, heading for the inlet to Rehoboth Bay, and actually passing around Cape Henlopen, since boats the size of theirs could not well be carted across the land to Love Creek, as if they were canoes.

Nick busied himself with the last of the oysters, which he had made sure to throw aboard the *Wireless,* and had found no time up to now, to tackle. George was tinkering with his motor, a customary amusement with him; for his heart was bent on learning how to coax yet another bit of speed from the engine that racked his boat so terribly when put at full speed.

On the *Comfort,* Josh and Herb, with room to spare, were having a game of dominoes, and enjoying themselves very much. This was the time when the joy of having plenty of elbow room made itself manifest.

Later on, during a little lull in the rainfall, Jack crept out to take observation, just as though he might have been an old salt, on board a sea-going vessel.

The storm was raging quite furiously, and made a roar that must have seemed more or less terrifying, had one been out on the big bay, instead of having this snug harbor.

"Whether this is Murderkill Creek, or the

one rejoicing in the aristocratic name of Jones, it doesn't matter one cent," he declared, as he turned to Jimmy, who had followed him outside for a breath of air before laying down to sleep. "Just listen to that howl out yonder, and then call this bully place a bad name, will you? Let her whoop it up as she pleases, we can laugh, and sleep in peace; for there's good ground between us and the raging sea. Hear the waves break on shore, would you, Jimmy? Starting out by rescuing a poor chap from a watery grave did bring us good luck, now, I'm thinking."

CHAPTER VII.

HOW THE MOTOR BOAT FLOTILLA WENT TO SEA.

In spite of the racket made by the storm, the boys managed to get in a pretty fair night's sleep. In the first place they were tired; and then they had some lost rest to make up. That first night had not been very much of a success as a slumber maker.

With the breaking of morning Jack took an observation by peeping out. The rain was still coming down spitefully; and the roar of the waves on the nearby shore announced how utterly impossible it would be for the small craft to continue their voyage south on this day.

"We're in for a stop-over, Jimmy," he announced, as a sleepy voice from among the blankets inquired as to the prospects.

It was not long before other laments were heard in the land, as Nick, George, Herb and Josh poked their heads out, in order to see what was going on.

"Gee! I hope you fellows don't think of butting into such a howler as this?" remarked George, a bit anxiously.

"I should say not," laughed Josh. "Though

I reckon our comfy old tub could stand up, and take her knocks without squealing. But we'd have to wait over at Lewes just the same, so what's the use?"

"I'd refuse to move a foot, and that's flat!" declared George, as he teetered at the stern of the narrow speed boat; for it happened just then that the clumsy Nick was moving around, and whenever this came about, the balance of the craft was visibly disturbed.

"No danger," declared Jack. "We're going to make the best of a bad bargain, and roost here in Murderkill Creek for another day."

"Whoo! once when I woke in the night," remarked Josh, "and as the wind slackened up a bit, I heard the awfullest noise ever. Sounded just like somebody was hollerin' for help. And when I remembered all they told us about this pesky place, I was a long time getting to sleep again, I give you my word."

"Sure, I was after havin' the same thing myself," declared Jimmy, eagerly. "And if any banshee in the ould country ever made a more horrible noise, I'll eat me hat; and that's no lie. Whatever d'ye suppose it was, Jack, old top?"

Jack laughed.

"Oh! owls!" he remarked, carelessly.

"But looky here," Josh flashed up, "don't

you reckon I've heard owls hoot before now? I tell you this was different, and much more ghastly; just like somebody was being half choked, and gurgling as he tried to call for help. It made the cold chills creep up and down my spinal column, that's right, now."

"Perhaps they've got a special brand of owl down along here, that outdoes all its species in whooping things up," laughed Jack. "And on account of some one hearing those same fierce noises long ago, the creek got its terrible name."

"Oh! forget it," broke in Herb; "especially since we've got to pass another night right here, and don't want to be bothered with bad dreams."

Breakfast was prepared in much the same fashion as their supper was cooked on the preceding evening. George and Nick had much the worst of it, with that flapping tent sheltering them, while the others found solid comfort in their hunting cabins.

Every little while George could be heard warning his stout and rather unwieldy mate to be more careful. Either he was rocking the boat in a manner most exasperating, or else rubbing up against the canvas top, which, in that particular spot, quickly developed a disposition to leak, as supposed waterproof can-

vas often will if you so much as place a finger on the underside while it is wet.

Along about nine o'clock, however, the clouds ceased to squeeze their watery contents down upon the adventurous cruisers.

"Hurra! boys!" Nick was heard to shout an hour later; "it's going to clear up, as sure as you live! Looky up yonder, and you'll see a break in the clouds. Then we can go ashore anyhow, and get some of the kinks out of our legs."

Nick proved a good prophet, for about eleven the clouds did begin to roll away, so that the sun peeped out. It was a welcome sight, and elicited a series of loud thankful cheers from the boys.

They were not long about getting on land. Josh in particular was seen to turn a few hand-flaps, as though in that energetic way he could loosen up his muscles the more speedily.

"But that sea will keep up more or less the rest of the day," observed Jack, as they sauntered over to a point where they could look out on the heaving surface of the broad Delaware Bay.

Having a stretch of miles in which to gather force under the piping wind, the waves were of considerable height, considering that the three boats were of diminutive size.

They watched the tumble of the billows until they were tired. Then each set about doing whatever appealed the most to his nature.

Thus Nick wandered along the bank of the creek, examining the shores closely, in the hope of being able to pick up a few shellfish, since his taste for oysters had grown to huge proportions after the feast already indulged in.

George set about drying things out on board the *Wireless,* so that he could tinker a little with that high spirited engine of his. Josh settled down to gather some wood, being bent on having an outdoor fire when the next meal came around, meaning supper; for they would only take a cold snack at noon. Herb was writing up his log; Jimmy getting some fishing tackle in readiness, he having an idea that finny prizes only awaited the taking in these parts; while Jack wandered forth, with a gun thrown over his shoulder, hungry for a little hunt.

They heard a double report half an hour later. Every fellow looked interested, for well did they know that when Jack pulled trigger there was a pretty fair chance of something dropping into the game bag.

Nick, who was pottering with a few rather poor looking oysters he had managed to discover in some little cove, grinned, and rubbed

himself comfortingly in the region of the stomach.

"Which shall it be, brethren, wild duck, quail on toast, rabbit stew, or great governor! wild turkey roasted?" he demanded, with the utmost confidence that Jack would fulfill at least one of these conditions.

When the Nimrod of the crowd came in sight, there was more or less interest manifested as to what he had shot. After all, it proved to be wild ducks. And Nick's eyes glistened when he saw that they were mallards, three fat fellows at that.

"I happened on 'em in a little wide reach of the creek about half a mile away," Jack explained; "and as this was a pot hunt, fellows, believe me, I didn't hesitate to shoot the first barrel straight at the three as they sat on the water. Two dropped and the other fellow made to rise; but that was dead easy, and I got him with the second shell."

"Yum! yum! I can imagine how good they'll taste," remarked Nick. "But as we haven't any oven along, how can we roast 'em? Jack, why not try that hole in the ground trick that you showed us last year when we were down on the Mississippi?"

"That's right, Jack!" echoed George.

"Just as you say, fellows; and the sooner we

get our oven in working order then, the better; because, you remember, it takes quite some hours for it to do the job. It's really the original fireless cooker, known to woodsmen for rafts of years before the idea was applied to bottles that will keep the stuff warm forty hours; and contrivances to gradually cook meats and other things. So here goes to get busy with the oven. Nick, you and Herb and Jimmy each pluck one of the ducks in the meantime, so they will be ready."

Now, this was a part of the business that Nick liked not at all; but he felt that it would be a shame to complain, when he delighted so much in being about to share in the treat; so he set to work, after his clumsy fashion, to make the feathers fly.

Jack, meanwhile, dug a proper hole in the ground, where he could find something like clay. With the help of Josh he started a fire in the same. This was kept up a certain length of time, until the walls of the oven were baked hard, and felt exceedingly hot. Then the ashes were cleaned out, the three ducks placed therein, after being carefully wrapped in big green leaves; and when this had been done the oven was hermetically sealed.

"We may have to wait a little later than usual for our supper," Jack said; "but when

they're done, it'll sure make your mouths water just to get the scent, after that oven is opened."

The afternoon passed slowly. All clouds had sailed away, and the sun shone in a cherry manner, giving promise for a glorious day on the morrow. Still, they could not think of changing their anchorage, because the waves continued to run high; and that boat of George's was always to be remembered as the one weak link in the chain.

Josh did himself proud in preparing supper that night. And when the oven was finally opened, the delicious odor that immediately assailed the nostrils of the hungry lads sent them into the seventh heaven of delightful anticipation.

Nor was the eating of the ducks at all a disappointment. Never had they tasted anything finer in all their lives.

"Say, if mallards can touch the spot like this, what must redheads or canvasbacks be like?" demanded Nick, as he polished a leg bone handsomely, grunting his pleasure meanwhile, and perhaps inwardly sighing because there was not one whole duck apiece.

"We'll see, later on," replied Jack; "because, as we have to pass through those North Carolina sounds where such ducks can be

found, there's a chance we'll take toll on the way."

"But I thought the hunting clubs had monopolized every foot of that water; and that only the wealthy New Yorkers, and ex-presidents, could shoot on Albemarle and Currituck Sounds?" remarked Josh.

"Well, pretty much all the best points *are* private territory now," Jack answered, frowning; "but it's possible to sneak a few shots when you're passing through on the way south. Wait and see what we can do, fellows."

"Well, one thing sure," declared Nick, admiringly; "if ever Jack Stormways pulls trigger on a canvasback, he goes along with this bully crowd, all right."

"Hear! hear!" cried the others, which caused the flattered Jack to smile and wave his hand in token of sincere appreciation.

"I reckon now," remarked George, as they sat around the blaze later on, conversing along various topics; "you've hung on to that bally old mystery all tight enough, Jack?"

"Meaning the little sealed packet the skipper of the hydro-aeroplane gave into my keeping?" the one addressed made reply. "Why, of course I have it safe; and if I manage to get through to Beaufort, I hope to hunt up the

same Van Arsdale Spence, and put it in his possession."

"But it may turn out to be a tougher proposition than you imagine," Herb remarked. "Perhaps the gentleman has buried himself in the wild country around that coast town; we can't spend much time hunting all over creation for him, can we?"

"Of course, we don't expect to do that," Jack quickly responded. "I only promised to look him up; and if he had gone away, to send the packet to him by mail, if we could get his present address. But what's the use crossing a bridge till you get to it? We worry a heap over things that never happen. Who said he was sleepy?"

"Me," spoke up Nick, who had been yawning at a prodigious rate for the last half hour. "You see, we didn't get much of a snooze aboard the old *Wireless* these two nights. Even at the best, the quarters are cramped; and if one fellow turns over, it nearly throws his mate out of his blanket bed."

"Rats!" scoffed George, always ready to stand up for his beloved craft, even though deep down in his heart he knew that the criticism might be well founded. "The trouble is, you're such a hefty fellow that you never just roll over, you *wallow!* Now, when I had Josh

for a while with me, things went much smoother."

"But I didn't go the same way, I'm telling you, George," declared the tall boy, quickly; "and you needn't try to coax me to change places with Nick any more. I've tried your boat, and I just don't like it. I've got to have room to stretch; and after a night aboard the *Wireless* I used to feel that I was tied up in a double knot all right. Nixy, I pass. Once is out for me."

But all of them were sleepy, and it was not long before they went aboard. There had been some talk of staying ashore; but it frittered out. Whether it was because of the frolicsome mosquitoes, that had put in their appearance with the dying out of the breeze; or recollections of the fearful name by which the stream was known on the chart and among men, no one confessed. They dribbled aboard the three boats, and went about making up their beds for the night in the most matter-of-fact way possible.

And, truth to tell, they did manage to secure a lot of refreshing sleep before another dawn came to call them to duty.

After breakfast they left their harbor, in which they had been storm-bound; and were

soon pushing along toward the southeast, where Lewes, back of Cape Henlopen, lay.

The bay was far from smooth, but by degrees it became more so as the day passed. Finally, after passing several lighthouses, they had glimpses of the great Government breakwater, and the barrier that has been erected to keep the ice from injuring the shipping.

That night they lay in a snug harbor in Broadhill Creek, a few miles above the town. Herb and Josh had gone with the *Comfort* to see if there was any mail for them; and to pick up a few little things which it was believed they needed to complete their happiness.

"I hope tomorrow will be as fine as today has been," Jack remarked that evening, as they sat around to partake of supper; "because we've got a nasty outside run to make, reaching for an inlet below; and we've just got to wait until the sea is smooth, if it takes a week. We promised our folks at home not to take any unnecessary chances, you remember, fellows."

"And that's one I'd refuse to tackle," observed George, without a blush. "The old ocean is a pretty big proposition for a teenty little motor boat to buck up against."

"Especially one that's built on the order of a wedge!" grunted Nick, unconsciously rubbing one of his fat sides sympathetically, as

though he might be getting a chronic muscular pain there, from being kept in a state of perpetual balance.

When the morning did come they found that the signs seemed most propitious indeed; and Jack declared that they could not afford to let such a chance pass by.

"Well, just as you say, Jack," sighed George. "The thing has to be done; and in that case the sooner we get it over with, the better. But I hope there won't be much more of this outside business before we reach Florida."

"Very little," replied the other, reassuringly. "And we're going to take no chances at any time, remember. This outside work is easy enough, always providing you bide your time, and no big wind from the east or south comes up while you're making the trip from one inlet to another. Sometimes, I'm told, the sea is like glass, with hardly a ripple."

"I hope it turns out that way today, then," remarked George, as he began to do a little final tinkering with his machinery before the start.

Jack watched the tide, knowing something about how the wind would be apt to come up at a certain change, as it usually does. Then, at eight o'clock, or "eight bells," as Nick de-

lighted to call it, the signal was given, the gallant little flotilla started off; and an hour later the three motor boats were moving through the heaving sea, with nothing but water toward the east and south, as far as the eye could reach.

They were now fully launched on the broad Atlantic, and must take chances of making a safe harbor before the coming of the wind.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE CAMP INVADED.

"Why, fellows, this is dead easy!" George called out, after they had been making good time for an hour or more, with the heaving sea showing no sign of taking undue advantage of the confiding little motor boats that had ventured on its placid bosom.

"Just as I told you," Jack answered, for they made sure to keep pretty close to each other while undertaking this passage. "Choose the right time, after a storm with the wind and sea gone to rest, and a little run like this is a picnic."

"But she looks pretty wide out there," remarked Nick, pointing toward the east.

"Oh! not so much," laughed Herb. "I should think that a matter of four thousand miles or so would cover it."

"Gee! whiz! that must be Africa over there, then?" Nick gasped.

"That's right!" Jack called; "but there's a trifle of haze hanging out just at present, so you can't quite see the tropical shores, with the black natives dancing around some missionary. But joking aside, boys, I think we're

going to make the riffle without any trouble. Already we must be well on the way there, and no sign of wind yet."

"Perhaps when she does come it may be in the west?" suggested Josh, who did occasionally have a brilliant thought, it seemed.

"Just so, and in that case we'd be all lunky," Jack answered back; "because with a west wind we could creep in close to the shore, since there'd be no waves rolling up on the beach. Suppose we touch up for a little faster gait."

"I'm willing," George sent back. "Put it up to the *Comfort* as usual. We'll have to adapt our pace to what she can do."

"Yes," called out Josh from the roomy boat, "and consider yourself lucky, George, if you don't have to call on the old Ark to give you a tow before we cross that same bar at the inlet. It wouldn't be the first time; and it ain't goin' to be the last either, believe me!"

"Oh! shucks! my engine is running as smooth as silk now. I could make circles around the whole bunch if I wanted to; but what's the use? We'd better stick together, you know. Somebody might want a little help."

"Sure, somebody might," mocked Josh.

Jack had let Jimmy have the wheel. With

his glasses he was scrutinizing the shore line as they made steady progress. He felt sure that he would be able to discover the right inlet long before they arrived at a point where they must alter their course in order to cross that bar which is always found at such openings.

Drawing the small amount of water their boats did, he anticipated not the slightest trouble in getting over. So as they increased their pace somewhat, Jack divided his time between watching the shore and the sky. Wind was something that would oblige them by remaining away.

They had figured on taking three hours to make the run; but it was nearer four, owing to the fact that there were some miles to pass over in leaving the creek where they had spent the preceding night, and reaching the open sea; and also because they had to go out some distance.

Jack sighted the inlet for which they were so anxiously pressing, and when the three motor boats had crossed the bar, gaining the security that lay behind the sandspits, all of them breathed easier. That night they would not see the flashing of the Henlopen light, or catch the distant gleam of the famous mariner's beacon on the point at Cape May, for

they were many miles to the south, and the glow of Chincoteague Light closer at hand.

But for some time at least they need not think of danger from a rising sea. If troubles were fated to come, as was almost inevitable, they were apt to be of an entirely different character. Perhaps they would get aground in shallow waters; it might be there would be times when the little flotilla would become lost in some intricate channels connecting the numerous bays that parallel the coast, and which are by degrees being dredged by the Government, with the idea of at some dim future date having an inland coast canal by which even small vessels of war may pass north and south.

Again, Jack had before him his chart, printed by the Department at Washington, and supposed to be perfectly reliable as to depth of water, position of lights and shoals, the lay of the many sinuous creeks, and all such important matters upon which the voyager over these sounds must depend for safe progress.

"Looky there, what's that over yonder on the water—gulls?" called Nick, after they had been moving along in procession for some time, the *Tramp* leading the way—for George realized that he must curb his speed propen-

sity while navigating these deceptive shallow waters, unless he wanted to take chances of wrecking his beloved craft on an unseen oyster reef, or a sandbar that lay just below the surface.

"I reckon they're ducks," quoth Josh, after a look. "How about it, Jack?"

Jack did not have to even make use of the glasses before replying in the affirmative.

Nick was all excitement at once.

"Say, why can't we sneak up on 'em, and knock about six on the head?" he hastened to demand; and then stooped down to drag out George's shotgun; at which the others shouted to him to be careful, for he was making the boat wobble fearfully.

"Well, we might give them a try," said Jack, with a smile; "but even if we did manage to bag a bunch, I reckon now, you wouldn't think them worth cooking."

"Why not; I've heard that even fishy ducks can be eaten, if you take the trouble to draw the feathers and skin off together?" Nick declared.

"Which is correct, all right, as far as it goes," Jack continued, placidly; "but I'd defy even such an expert as Josh here, to cook those ducks so as to disguise the woody flavor!"

"Haw! haw! haw! Jack means they're only

a bunch of wooden decoys—stool ducks!" roared Josh, some of the others echoing his merriment. "Perhaps you c'n digest pretty near anything, you're such a walking cemetery, Nick; but I bet you draw the line at a wooden duck, hey?"

Nick relapsed into silence, but George took up the talk.

"Ain't this early in October for duck hunting, Jack? Some of the States don't allow it till November, you know," he inquired, seeking information.

"Yes; and perhaps this fellow is only giving his stools an airing, after all, to see how they float; because the main raft of ducks won't be here till later."

During the day they landed at one or two docks, where the customary groups of staring natives surrounded them, asking questions, examining the clever little craft beside which their own looked cumbersome, though seaworthy, and giving such a sad mixture of information that in the end Jack was glad he had his reliable charts to fall back on, since one man's account seemed to be exactly contradictory in comparison with the next one.

The boys believed that it would be wise to halt for the night away from any of the settlements along the sound or bay. Perhaps

these rough looking fellows might be all right, and just as honest as they make them; but previous experiences had warned Jack and his chums that there are always some bad characters belonging in every isolated town and hamlet; and there was no use tempting such rascals more than seemed necessary.

Accordingly, when the afternoon drew near its end, they began to cast about for a camping place. To the delight of Nick they had been able to pick up a duck here and there, until there were now four on board.

"If we could only get a brace more," he kept saying; "or even one might do, as Josh eats so little; how nice it would be. Jack, don't you suppose, now, you might creep up behind that island yonder, drop ashore, since the law forbids one to shoot ducks from a craft driven by sails or any motive power except a fellow's muscles, and get a shot into the lovely little bunch that is sporting there?"

"Anything to oblige," was the response; and with that the head of the *Tramp* was turned aside, so that the skipper could presently jump ashore.

His crawl across the reedy island was not as pleasant as one might wish; but when he fired both barrels at the rising flock, Nick nearly laughed himself sick to see not only

two, but *five* birds fall with as many splashes into the water.

One wounded duck managed to get away. Jack declared it must have dived, and held on to some of the eel grass at the bottom, preferring death to falling into the hands of duck-eating human beings; for this often happens, as every hunter knows.

Again an oven was to be made, and they hoped to have a feast for the next day.

"What's to hinder our sleeping on shore tonight, fellows?" asked Josh, as they found a pretty good place for a camp.

"Oh! please do!" cried poor, tortured Nick; "I'd love to rest comfy for just once again."

"Huh!" grunted stubborn George, "that suits me first rate, because I insist on keeping to my quarters aboard, and there'll be plenty of room. Besides, I won't wake up every little while when you roll over, thinking the boat is going to turn turtle."

Upon being put to a vote, five of them were in favor of trying it. So about the time they began to feel sleepy, blankets were brought from the boats, and each fellow started to make himself as comfortable as possible under the circumstances.

Jack had selected his sleeping place with an eye to its convenience; also the fact that

by raising himself on his elbow he could have a survey of the entire camp, counting the three boats. And it might have been noticed that both he and Herb made sure to take their guns to bed with them, a fact Nick saw with a bit of uneasiness.

The *Tramp* and the *Comfort* were both fastened up, for it was possible to lock their cabins in an emergency. George was under his canvas shelter, trying to make himself believe he fully enjoyed the sensation of loneliness.

Finally a silence came over the camp on the shore. The fire died down gradually, for no one bothered to keep it going, the night being anything but cold.

Jack was always a light sleeper. He had trained himself to awaken if there was anything unusual going on. And when he suddenly opened his eyes, seeing the stars over his head, he knew instinctively that it was not far from daybreak. He also had a sort of intuition that there was some one or *something* moving close by.

And so, Jack, reaching out and securing his gun, began to softly raise his head, hoping that the starlight would be strong enough to let him see what was going on. What discovery he made gave him something of a little shock.

CHAPTER IX.

THE DESPERATION OF HUNGER.

The night was still. Only the soft wash of the tiny waves on the shore came to the ears of the *Tramp's* skipper as he thus raised his head to take an observation.

First he looked in the direction of the three motor boats, and in particular the one on board of which George was sleeping. Perhaps he had a slight suspicion to the effect that some movement on the part of this chum had caused the scuffling sounds.

His search for an explanation in this quarter proved to be a failure. He could plainly see the tan-colored canvas tent which covered the speed boat; but it seemed to be perfectly motionless.

Just then Jack sniffed the air two or three times. Come, that was surely a most delightful odor that seemed to be wafted in his quarter. Had Nick, for instance, been alongside, and wide-awake, he would have immediately declared that it reminded him of roast duck!

By the way, they did have a full half dozen waders in the process of baking in that crude earthen oven. Jack shot a quick glance over

in the direction where he and Nick had built the receptacle.

What could that dark object be? Even as he looked he surely saw it move. Yes, a second and more positive examination convinced him of this fact. Then there was danger of the expected breakfast being carried off while they slept.

Was it some prowling bear that had followed the scent, and dug out the cooked fowls? The bulk of the figure assured him that it could be no ordinary raccoon, or even a cunning fox.

Would he be justified in shooting? At that short distance Jack realized that he could riddle the object sadly; for the charge of shot, having no chance to spread, would go with all the destructive power of a bullet.

His finger was on the trigger, but he wisely refrained. Perhaps after all this night intruder might not prove to be a bear, nor yet any other wild beast. Roast duck may appeal just as strongly to the human family. If any prowler had seen them bury the ducks on the preceding evening, might he not have waited patiently until this hour, just before the dawn, in order to allow the fowls to cook?

Was that a grunt of satisfaction he now caught? It certainly sounded very much along

that order. Evidently the transgressor and thief must have finally succeeded in accomplishing his burrowing, judging from that decided aroma that was scattering about the vicinity. Even then he might be trying to gather up the spoils, loth to let a single duck escape his bold foray.

Well, Jack believed he ought to have something to say about that. He had gone to considerable trouble to collect half a dozen ducks; and, besides, it took more or less time to build that same oven and prepare the game for the receptacle. They were not in the feeding line, either. If a poor hungry wayfarer chose to approach them the right way, and appeal for help, he would find that generous hearts beat in the bosoms of these good-natured lads. But a thief who came crawling into camp when they were asleep, and tried to make a clean sweep of their expected breakfast, did not appeal to Jack at all.

"Hello! there, my friend; if you start to run, I'm going to fill you full of shot; so don't you dare try it!" Jack suddenly remarked, in a clear voice.

Up bobbed other heads near by, as these words awoke some of the sleepers.

"Keep still, boys, and don't get in my way," said Jack, calmly. "I've got a thief covered,

and expect to bring him down if he so much as takes one jump. Easy now, Herb; keep your gun ready, and don't shoot until I say so."

For all he talked so threateningly, of course Jack would have done no such thing had the fellow bolted. Better lose a thousand ducks than have cause to regret hasty action. But it seemed that his bold words had the effect he wanted; for the shadowy figure continued to hug the ground in the spot where the oven lay.

"Don't yuh shoot me, Mistah!" a quavering voice now broke out; and immediately they understood that the intended spoiler of their breakfast must be a negro. "I ain't 'tendin' tuh run away, 'deed I ain't, sah. I gives mahself up. I ain't eben gut a knife 'long with me!"

"Josh!" said Jack, quietly.

"Yes, I'm on deck, all right; what is it?" replied the tall boy, close by.

"You fixed some stuff for starting a fire in a hurry, didn't you?" continued Jack.

"Sure I did; and it's right here beside me," Josh hastened to reply.

"Then strike a match, and let's have some light. We'll look this coon over, and see whether we want to take him down to Frank-

lin City with us tomorrow, or give him some grub and let him go scot free."

Jack was looked upon as a leader by his chums, and when he received these instructions Josh never hesitated a second about starting to carry them out to the letter.

Scratch went his match, which he always kept handy, being the recognized *chef* of the expedition. Then the light wood flamed up, communicated with other stuff, and in a "jiffy," as Josh called it, the scene was illuminated.

Meanwhile Jack had climbed out from among the folds of his blanket, always keeping his shotgun leveled in the direction of the crouching figure of the detected marauder of their stores.

He found a badly frightened negro, rather a young fellow, and as black as tar. The whites of his eyes looked staring as he followed the movements of that threatening gun, every time Jack moved.

"Come, get up here, and step nearer the fire," said Jack. "When we have company we always like to entertain them in proper style. Now, sit down here, and give an account of yourself. What's your name, to start with?"

George had come tumbling out of the depths

of the *Wireless,* aroused by the sound of voices, although Jack had not been talking in an excited way. Herb, Jimmy and Josh were all on hand, with blankets wrapped about them; for the night air was a bit keen, and they had on only their underclothing and pajamas.

But Nick could be heard snoring away contentedly in his snug nest, dead to the world and all its cares. Nor did any one think to take the trouble to arouse the fat boy, so that he calmly slept through the entire proceedings.

"I'se Jawge Washington Thomas; an' I libs back dar in de kentry at er place called Pokomoke City, sah," the prowler promptly answered, as though he realized that since he had now fallen into the hands of these young fellows, he might as well make a clean breast of it.

"And what are you doing here on the shore of Chincoteague Bay, creeping into a camp, and raiding our provisions?" pursued the one who held the gun.

" 'Deed, an' I done must a been a fool," sighed the prisoner; "an' dat's no lie, tuh try an' git dem ducks like er fox, w'en I orter stepped up, bold like, an' asked yuh foh a bite. But I was dat hungry, boss, I jes' couldn't help it. I seen yuh put dem fowls in de little hole in de groun', an' somethin'

tempts me tuh hang 'round till dey orter be done foh suah."

"But you haven't told us why you're here, instead of over in Pokomoke City, where you belong, George?" went on Jack, meaning to have the whole story.

"I'se gwine tuh tell yuh hit all, boss, 'deed I is. Den yuh kin do what yuh want wid me, only foh de love o' misery gib me sumpin tuh eat 'fore yuh takes me down tuh Franklin City, what de sheriff is. I'se ben hidin' out now foh nigh a month. Yuh see I done git in a muss wid a white man, an' we had a scuffle. He done trip an' cut his haid on a stone when he falls down; but dey declar I cut him. 'Taint nothin' serious like, gib yuh mah word on it, boss; an' Hank he ben up an' 'round dis three weeks an' more. But dey got it in foh me ober dere, an' I ain't gwine tuh take de chances ob gittin' kotched."

"And so you've been hiding out for a whole month, have you, George?" Jack asked, now lowering his gun, since he realized there was no longer any necessity for standing guard over the dejected chap, hungry, ragged and forlorn as he seemed to be.

"Dat's jes' what I done has, sah. At fust I 'spected tuh make mah way tuh Baltimore, 'case dar I got a brudder; but I jest cudn't

go 'way, yuh see, widout mah wife an' two chillen. So I kept right on hangin' 'round hyah, an' tryin' tuh git word tuh dem. I has a letter from Susie jest yisterday, sayin' as how she'd jine me termorry at de Scooter Landin', whar a boat is loadin' wid lumber foh Baltimore. An' my Susie sez as how she got de money tuh take us all dar."

"That sounds reasonable enough, George. Now tell us why you crawled into camp and tried to lift those roast ducks?" Jack asked, turning to wink at his chums, who in their odd garb were gathered around, listening and grinning.

"Jes' as I was sayin', boss; I seen yuh come in here las' night, an' git ready tuh camp. Wanted tuh ask yuh foh sompin' tuh eat de wust kin', but w'en I done sees de guns yuh kerry, I got cold feet; 'case I kinder s'pected yuh mout be all alookin' foh me. So I hangs 'round till I reckons de fowls dey must be ready tuh eat. Den I slicks in, an' tried tuh grab one. Dat's de whole story, boss, gib yuh mah word it is. An' I hopes yuh belibes me."

"See here, George, when a man gives evidence in court he is expected to prove it, if he can," Jack remarked, seriously. "Now, that's a rather interesting story you tell; but how can we know that it's true? You mentioned

receiving a letter from your wife a bit ago; suppose you show it to us. That would go a great ways toward making us believe; and getting you a breakfast in the bargain."

"Good for you, Jack!" exclaimed the skipper of the *Wireless*.

"A bully idea!" commented Josh; while the other two nodded their heads, as if they fully backed these sentiments.

Jawge Washington Thomas seemed in no wise dismayed by this proposition. They saw a wide grin expand across his sable face as he immediately thrust a hand into the pocket of the ragged jacket he wore over his faded cotton shirt.

"Dat seems tuh be de right thing, sah," he remarked, as he drew something out. "I'se right glad now I done kep' dis little letter. Reckons as how I read de same half a million times dis last twenty-foah hours. Dar she be, sah. Hopes as how yuh kin make out de writin'. My Susie she smart gal, 'fore she marry dis good-foh nothin' nigga; she eben done teach school. Reckon she too good foh me, boss; but if I eber gits up in Baltimore, I'se gwine tuh do the right thing by Susie, gib yuh my word I is, sah."

The boys crowded around, each eager to see what sort of a letter Susie had sent to her

man, in his time of trouble. This was what they made out, although the missive had been handled so often by the fugitive that it was well begrimed:

"George—The schooner *Terrapin* will be at Scooter's Landing day after tomorrow, Thursday. I sold out everything, and will be aboard with the children, bound for Baltimore. We can live here in Pokomoke no longer. Be on the lookout. Your wife Susie."

That was all, but it must have brought a lot of hope to the wretched fugitive, who believed that he would be tarred and feathered, or else lynched, if ever he was caught by those Maryland whites. And his claim that Susie had an education Jack saw was well founded.

"How about it, boys; shall we take George to Franklin City, or give him a good breakfast and let him wait for Susie and the kids?" asked Jack, though he felt positive as to what the answer would be before he spoke.

"He can have half of my duck!" announced Herb.

"And the whole of mine," echoed Josh.

"That settles it," laughed Jack. "So, George Washington Thomas, draw right up to the fire and begin operations. A starving man can be excused for doing lots of things that in a fellow with a full stomach might ap-

pear to be a bad go. We'll forgive you this time; and hope that when you get to Baltimore, you'll show Susie how you can work for a woman who stands by her man like she has."

"I'se gwine tuh, boss; I'se got mah mind made up on dat, I tells yuh," declared the fugitive, with an air of determination that Jack liked to see.

And as his hunger was such a real thing, they forced him to begin to eat without further delay. Having dressed themselves, for the dawn was now coming on, they started operations looking toward breakfast, wishing to give the poor fellow a treat in the way of some hot coffee and a rasher of bacon.

Fancy the amazement of Nick, as he sat up and rubbed his eyes, on discovering an unknown negro, seated on a log, with a tin plate on his knees, and devouring one of the ducks that had been placed in the primitive oven the night before.

"W-w-what's all this mean? Who's your friend, and whose duck is he making 'way with, fellows? I hope now you haven't let me sleep on, just to play a trick on me and leave a rack of bones on my dish. Did he drop down out of the sky, or have you engaged a pilot for the treacherous waters of the lower

Chincoteague Bay?" was the way he broke out, as he discovered his chums grinning.

When he heard the story, Nick hardly knew whether to be provoked, or take it as a joke, that he had been allowed to sleep through it all.

"But I ain't going to be outdone by any of you," he said, magnanimously; "and if George Washington can get away with another whole duck, let him tackle mine!"

CHAPTER X.

NICK IN SEARCH OF A MERMAID.

"Good boy, Nick!" cried George, who knew what a great sacrifice the fat boy had in mind, when he offered to give up his share to the hungry stranger.

"But there's no need of it," declared Josh. "You know I don't have any appetite in the morning, so he's eating my duck."

"And as for me," piped up Herb, "I'm satisfied with half a bird. Besides, somehow, duck for breakfast seems rather strong. I'm used to something light—a rasher of bacon, flapjacks, or hominy, with coffee. So hold your horses, Nick, and get ready to take your turn."

After the meal had been completed, preparations were made looking toward an early start. They anticipated having a hard day's work, several inlets having to be crossed, with the ocean setting in heavy against them, it might be.

Jack had heard some pretty wild stories concerning the perils that might be expected while crossing these same inlets, where at the

full sweep of the tide small boats were in danger of being upset in the mad swirl.

He hardly believed more than half of what he heard, however, knowing how prone the natives are to exaggerate things. Besides, the staunch motor boats were not in the same class as the clumsy craft used by those who navigated these shoal waters along the Virginia coast.

They said good-bye to the fugitive black. Some of them, in the generosity of their boyish hearts, had slipped quarters and half dollars in the ready hand of the fellow; and his eyes danced with happiness as he stood there, waving the skippers and crews of the little flotilla farewell.

"It was a mighty lucky thing for George Washington that he dropped into our camp last night," laughed Herb, as they began to lose sight of the waving hat of the negro.

"Yes, and just as lucky that he made a failure of his job," remarked Jack, for they were moving along close together, so that it was easy to talk back and forth. "If he'd managed to get away with a duck or two, that would have ended it all. As it is, he's holding a nice little bunch of coin, that will help pay for the grub, after he gets to Baltimore with his family."

"I suppose it's a square deal George gave us?" queried Josh.

"Now, what do you mean by that?" demanded Herb.

"He couldn't have been playing a trick on us, could he?" the other went on; for Josh was often inclined to be somewhat suspicious

"Come off!" scoffed George.

"That's too bad, Josh, for you to suspect him of trying to pull the wool over our eyes," Jack declared, reproachfully.

"Oh! I don't doubt him, so to speak," Josh protested; "but you know I'd hate everlastingly to be done by a coon."

"That letter was genuine enough," observed Jack, thoughtfully; "and fellows, perhaps you didn't notice the thing, but there were blurs on that writing, just as if somebody had been crying, and the tears dropped on the paper. Whether it was poor old George Washington, feeling awful lonely, and hungry, who wept; or his wife while she was writing the note, doesn't matter. But those marks went a big way toward convincing me his story was genuine."

Somehow Josh turned red, and no more was said. Those happy-go-lucky lads could feel for the sentiment that had caused those tears.

"That's Chincoteague Light, ain't it?" asked Herb, after a while, pointing ahead.

"Sure it is!" Jimmy cried. "I saw it winking at me every time I woke up last night, so I did, me bhoy!"

"Then we strike across that inlet soon?" suggested George, showing just the slightest sign of nervousness, Jack thought.

Of the three skippers, George had the most cause for looking serious whenever there arose any chance for trouble, either through a storm, or tidal currents. His speed boat, being so very narrow in beam, and cranky, was least fitted to contend with raging seas; since there must always be great danger of an upset.

"In less than half an hour we'll spin across and get behind Wallop's Island. As the tide is pretty well up, we ought to make the riffle there. I'd hate to get stuck in the mud, and have to wait ten or twelve hours for another tide to float us off," Jack made answer; for, as he had the charts, they always looked to him for information.

"Then what next?" asked Herb, wishing to be posted.

"In an hour or more we ought to reach Assawaman Inlet, and after that will come Gargathy, Matomkin, and then Watchapreague; which last is said to be the most dangerous

along the whole coast," replied the commodore of the fleet.

"You don't say!" ejaculated George, pretending to look unconcerned; "and just why is that, please?"

"Well, it happens to be wider than any other, and the currents are fierce. Besides, some of the natives declare there are mermaids, or something after that order, that try to overturn boats crossing."

At that the boys let out a combined yell.

"Me for a pretty mermaid, then!" cried Nick. "I always did want to have a chat with one of those fair damsels of the sea, ever since I read how they used to comb their hair and sing to the mariners in those old days of Greece."

"Makes a fellow think of all the old mythological things," declared George.

"That's right," Herb declared. "You remember about Scylla and Charybdis, the two fabled monsters that used to alarm the old chaps hundreds and hundreds of years ago; but which turned out to be a dangerous rock and a big sucker hole, called a whirlpool? That's what ails this old inlet, I guess. The currents suck hard; and these crackers along the coast think unseen hands are trying to drag them down."

"What I don't like about it," remarked Josh, "is the sharks."

"Oh! I see you have been reading about it, then," said Jack, quickly. "I didn't mean to say anything about those monsters."

"Then there *are* sharks around?" demanded George; while Nick turned a little pale as he leaned over the side of the speed boat and listened.

"Yes; all accounts agree on that score," Jack admitted. "But if we manage right, and take the inlet at the proper time, there's no reason why any of us should bother our heads about the scaly pirates of the sea."

"I only hope none of 'em butt up against the *Wireless,* that's all," grunted the skipper of the narrow boat.

"Gracious! do you think there's any chance of that?" asked Nick, looking as though he half felt like begging Herb to take him aboard at the crucial time, only that he hated to show the white feather.

"Oh! hardly," laughed Jack, desirous of cheering the other up.

"Still, it might be wise for Nick to keep under cover while we're making that same passage across," suggested Josh, wickedly.

"And just why me, any more than you?" demanded the fat boy, indignantly.

"Well, the sight of such a bag of bones as me wouldn't be apt to stir those man-eaters up to any extent; but if they caught a glimpse of such a rolypoly morsel as you, Nick, it would set 'em wild."

"Oh! let up, won't you?" grumbled Nick. "This is too serious a subject to make fun over. I don't just hanker to make a dinner for any old shark, and don't you forget it, Josh Purdue."

They crossed the inlet at Chincoteague without the slightest trouble. Beyond lay Wallop's Island, and their speed had to be considerably reduced while navigating the tortuous and narrow channel lying between that body of reedy land and the main shore.

Despite the wideawake work of the pilot in the *Tramp,* there was always a liability of some boat charging upon an unseen mudbank; and hence it was advisable to take things rather easy, so that in case of such a disaster, it would be possible to pull off again, with the help of the other boats.

Then came the next inlet, which was also crossed easily.

"Say, nothing hard about this," George called out, as they headed once more down the bay toward Gargathy Inlet.

"Lots of things look harder than they turn

out to be," answered Herb, who was having it easy enough in his wide-beamed craft.

"Still, be on your guard all the time," cautioned Jack, who meant to keep near the erratic *Wireless* all the time, because he felt it in his bones that if any accident did happen it would be in that quarter.

At noon they drew up and went ashore on a sandspit, where they ate lunch. Nick of course "browsed" around, as he called it, in search of oysters, and was speedily rewarded by discovering a supply. Indeed, they had hard work making him break away, when Jack tooted his conch shell as the signal for a start.

Matomkin Inlet proved as easy as the others.

"Now for the terror!" remarked George, as later in the afternoon they approached the spot where Watchapreague lay.

Ahead they could see the whitecaps marking the fierce cross currents that have given this half-mile wide inlet its bad name. Many a wreck of shore boats has taken place here, and lives been lost.

"We might as well get over now, as in the morning, for the tide is as good as it will ever be. Those whitecaps are caused by the wind blowing from the shore, and the tide coming

in," Jack decided, as they advanced steadily on.

"And in case of any accident, then, a fellow couldn't be carried out to sea," George remarked, with what seemed like a distinct look of relief.

So the start was made. All around them the water fairly boiled, and unseen influences apparently tugged at the frail little craft, as though the fingers of those fabled monsters were gripping their keels.

They were just about the middle and most dangerous spot when George gave a sudden cry. It was echoed by a wail from Nick. Looking up, Jack discovered a sight that thrilled him to the core. The erratic *Wireless* had chosen to play its skipper a nasty trick at just the time it should have been on its best behavior, coming to a stop with such abruptness that poor Nick lost his hold forward, and went splashing into the water like a giant frog!

CHAPTER XI.

A STUNNING DISCOVERY.

In an instant all was confusion!

All sorts of shouts broke from the boys; and George, leaning over the side of his stalled *Wireless,* in the vain hope of being able to clutch the boy who was in the dangerous waters of the inlet, came near upsetting his tottering boat completely.

Nick had disappeared as soon as he struck the water, but such a fat fellow could not long remain under the surface, so he speedily made his appearance, struggling terribly, and looking badly frightened.

There had been a time when Nick could not swim a stroke; but, by keeping heroically at it, he had managed to master the art to some extent. Desperation assisted him in this predicament, and the way he threshed the water was a caution. Herb afterwards declared it beat any old stern-wheel towboat he had ever seen, charging up the current of the mighty Mississippi.

Luckily enough, Jack had anticipated something of this sort. That was why he had persisted in keeping as close to the speed boat

as he dared, without risking a collision. He later on said he felt it in his bones that if the *Wireless* had one more kink of evil in her, she was just bound to let it out at the most critical moment. And it had proven just so.

The first thing Jack did when he saw the head and wildly plunging arms of his fat chum appear, was to hurl the life preserver he had snatched up from the spot where he kept it handy.

And so well aimed was the cork buoy that it fell just in front of the struggling Nick, who gave a half-strangled whoop, doubtless under the impression that it was a shark, or perhaps one of those same mermaids he had declared it his ambition to meet face to face.

"Grab hold of it, Nick!" shouted George, excitedly.

"It's a life preserver. Get a grip on it, Nick!" bellowed Jack, as he gradually turned the nose of the *Tramp* around, meaning to bear down upon the imperiled boy.

Luckily Nick heard what they said, for he was seen to make a wild clutch for the floating buoy, and catch hold of it before the treacherous swirls carried it beyond his reach.

"Oh! look there!" shrieked Jimmy. "That must be the fin of a shark!"

It was.

And further along Jack even caught sight of several more. The fierce creatures had heard the splash, and apparently scenting a fine dinner, were dashing this way and that, bent upon finding the object that had made all the rumpus.

"George, get your gun, and be ready to shoot!" said Jack, himself pale now with sudden anxiety.

So the skipper of the *Wireless,* understanding that this was a time to keep cool if they would save their cheery comrade, reached down under the side of his boat. When he bobbed up a few seconds later he was clutching his rifle, which he had brought along, in the faint hope that before the long cruise was done he might get a deer, or even a bear, with it.

Now the nose of the *Tramp* was heading straight for the spot where Nick clung to the life buoy.

"Splash as hard as you can!" shrilled Josh, who seemed to remember that sharks can sometimes be kept away by this means.

And immediately the fat boy exerted himself at a great rate, his legs and one arm beating the water until it sounded like a vast mill in action.

But as Jack cast a swift glance around he

saw that the nearest shark was heading straight toward poor Nick. Jimmy had heard what was said to George. He, too, had pulled out a shotgun, and was cowering close by, holding the weapon in his hands, and with a grim look of "do or die" on his freckled face.

Bang! went the rifle in George's hands.

The bullet struck the water above the advancing monster, but seemed to do no particular damage, for they could see that he was still coming directly on.

Now the prow of the *Tramp* was just alongside Nick; but the shark seemed dreadfully close, too. Dropping his hold on the wheel, Jack bent over to clutch the shoulders of the fat boy. He knew that he would have a tremendous task dragging him aboard, soaked as his clothes were; but desperation causes those who try, to perform wonderful deeds, and Jack felt equal to most anything just then.

He was still dragging Nick upward, and the other was trying to help himself as well as he was able, when the big fish, rushing under, seemed to turn over while opening his terrible mouth, lined with cruel teeth.

And then Jimmy, who had been holding his fire for a good opportunity, sent the contents of the shotgun straight into that distended mouth.

Jack pulled his chum aboard, and almost fell himself, such was the relief that passed over him. The boat was whirling around in the mad currents, but as Jack again took the wheel he quickly mastered its erratic movements.

"Sure, I guv him the cowld meal, that toime, I did!" shouted the delighted Jimmy, threatening to attempt a real jig in his excitement. "How d'ye like cowld lead, me bully bhoy? Next toime take one of your own kind, will ye, and lave our chum be. Look at the bog-trotter kicking out yonder, would ye? Don't I hope some of his kind will ate him up now. It's the biter bitten, fellows. Look! by the powers, if they ain't tacklin' the gossoon, so they are!"

It was even so, for the wildest commotion was taking place out in the quarter where the wounded shark had been struggling.

Even Nick managed to crawl to the side of the boat and gape. A look of satisfaction took the place of the frightened expression on his round face.

"Anyhow, he didn't get me, did he, fellows?" Nick seemed to find a strange pleasure in repeating time and again, in a hysterical way.

The remainder of the inlet was readily

passed, George managing to get a rope to the skipper of the *Comfort,* who towed the tricky speed boat to safety.

Jack did not mean to lose that life preserver, and he had Jimmy get it with the boathook as they passed by. It had served Nick a good turn, and showed the wisdom of one being always prepared for trouble.

Nick was shaking at a great rate. This might come partly from his recent excitement, but Jack knew that the air was rather cool to one who sat in garments saturated with salt water.

"We'd better be on the lookout for a camping ground somewhere on Paramore Island, here," he remarked. "A fire would come in handy for Nick; and, besides, I reckon we've done all we ought to for one day. If tomorrow pans out as lucky, we ought to get in touch with the lighthouse at Cape Charles."

"Well, I only hope," sighed Nick, between shivers, "that the programme will be a bit varied tomorrow. If there *has* to be somebody go overboard to hunt for mermaids, let me off, won't you, fellows?"

"We'll think it over, Nick," called George, who was taking it easy now, since his engine was dead, and the *Comfort* drawing him along in its wake.

They presently discovered a place that seemed to promise a certain amount of comfort; and so a landing was made.

"Smells like oysters around here, fellows," was the first remark Nick made, as he scrambled ashore, and started to thresh his arms about, in the endeavor to get up a circulation —Jack had advised this as a preventative against a cold.

"Well, I honestly believe that chap would think of eating if he heard the angel Gabriel tooting his horn," declared Herb. "He'd say that he wanted to be fortified again the journey across that old river Styx."

"Sure, I would!" admitted the grinning fat boy, frankly. "Anyhow, oysters are good stuff, whichever way you take 'em, and that nobody can deny. Get your old fire going, so I can change my clothes, and have an hour to gather a crop. Josh said if I got enough he'd give us scalloped oysters for supper. Yum! yum! don't that just make your mouths water, boys? It does mine."

The fire was soon going, and beside its cheery heat Nick made the change. His soaked garments were hung up to dry the best they could, though it is a hard job when clothes have been in salt water.

Then, with a tin pail Nick set out to gather

his beloved shellfish, signs of which had been noted near by.

In half an hour he had deposited three pails of what seemed to be very fair bivalves in a pile near the fire.

"Set some of the others to work opening them, Josh," Nick observed. "My fingers are too sore for the job. Besides, I've done my part, seems like, in getting the crop gathered."

Jack and Jimmy took hold, and with the oyster knives soon began to fill a receptacle with the contents of the shells.

Nick was busying himself whacking a few open on the side, "just to test them," as he said; for they noticed that he made no contributions to the general fund.

"A trifle salty, but just prime," the judge of oysters remarked, several times, as he devoured a fat one. "This is worth coming for, boys. The coast for me every time, when you can get such treats as this. Think I gathered enough? Want any more, Josh?"

"Oh! hould up!" cried Jimmy, whose fingers were getting sore from the various cuts received from the sharp edges. "Sure, we've got enough for a rigiment, so we have. Just ate up the balance yoursilf, and stow your gab, Nick."

A short time later, Jack, who had been rum-

aging around aboard the *Tramp,* called out:

"Anybody see my old coat lying around loose?"

At that, Jimmy uttered a startled cry and jumped up.

"Glory be!" he exclaimed. "I forgot all about that, Jack, darlint. It must have been your coat that wint overboard in the inlet, and sank, while I was shootin' the murderous shark. And by the powers, that is too bad, beca'se it had that bally ould paper missage in it ye was to deliver to Van Arsdale Spence at Beaufort!"

The other boys echoed the disconsolate cry of Jimmy, and looked at Jack, as if they felt the greatest pity for him in his unfortunate loss.

CHAPTER XII.

THE CAMP UNDER CAPE CHARLES LIGHT.

"Say, he don't look bothered a teenty bit!" exclaimed Josh, surprised because Jack seemed so free from care.

"And look at him, would you!" burst out Herb; "why, blessed if he ain't grinning right now, to beat the band!"

"Here, own up, Jack, old boy, what's got you? Didn't you care much whether you ever got that mysterious packet into the hands of this Spence fellow?" demanded George.

"To be sure, I did; and do yet," replied Jack; "but that's no reason why I ought to go around pulling a long face and whimpering, especially since no milk has been spilled after all."

"But, sure, it was the ould coat as I saw go over!" ejaculated Jimmy, stubbornly.

"I guess it must have been, because I just can't find the same anywhere," admitted the other, nodding.

"And ye put that packet in the inside pocket, beca'se I saw ye," Jimmy went on.

"Yes, I did," Jack chuckled; "but then none of you saw me take it out again later

and stow it in another place. You see, I seemed to have an idea my coat might get lost, because half the time I have it off."

"Then the packet is,—where?" asked George, brightening up.

"Down in the bottom of my fishing tackle box at this very minute, and not in the stomach of a Watchapreagué shark!" declared Jack, confidently.

"Hurrah! Count another for our wise ould chum, Jack. He's got the long head, so he has. Let's have a squint at the documint again, now. 'Twould be good for sore eyes to glimpse the same!" Jimmy declared, enthusiastically.

So Jack had to get out his fishing tackle box, and, dipping down into its depths, produce the valuable packet.

After that, preparations for supper were allowed to go on apace. As for the missing coat, Jack declared that it did not amount to much, anyhow, as he had another handy. And besides, with a sweater to fall back upon in case of cold occasions, he had no regrets.

"I wonder will we really find this party, when we get around Beaufort?" Herb remarked, as they sat there, watching Josh wrestle with the broken crackers which, with the large pan of oysters, were to form the mess

which, cooked as best they could over the red coals of the fire, would form the main part of the meal.

"We will, if anybody can," replied Jack, with determination in his manner.

"You just bet we will," affirmed Nick, showing unexpected interest in the idea.

The fact was, despite the many raw oysters he had swallowed, Nick was almost famished, and was trying the best he knew how to keep his attention from the slow preparations being made for supper.

But all in good time the meal was pronounced ready. Josh, in lieu of an oven in which to bake his scalloped oysters, had kept the pan on the fire, with a cover over the top; and really it had been pretty well browned.

They pronounced it simply delicious. Nick softened toward his ancient tormentor, Josh, and, patting him on the back, declared that when it came to cooking he had them all "beaten to a frazzle."

"What's that light away off there to the south, Jack?" asked Herb, after they had eaten to a standstill.

"I rather fancy that must be the Hog Island Light," replied the other. "Before we make that, we have to cross another inlet, this time over a mile wide; but they say Little Machi-

pongo isn't in the same class as that last one, for danger and ugly currents."

"Gee! I hope not," grumbled Nick, who was scraping the pan in which the oysters had been cooked so beautifully.

"Then comes Great Machipongo Inlet, and a few more for tomorrow, after which we are due to reach Cape Charles," Jack went on, always ready to impart information when he saw that his chums wanted to know anything.

"This whole coast seems to be a series of bays and sounds, connected by little creeks and channels that, at flood time, can be safely navigated by a boat that don't happen to draw many feet of water," Herb remarked.

"Yes, and that is the case pretty near all the way from New York to the lower end of Florida," Jack observed. "Some day it's going to be possible to make the entire trip as easy as falling off a log. The Government is doing a heap of dredging in lots of places."

"Yes," remarked George, sarcastically; "if they'd only put some of the millions in here that they squander on good-for-nothing creeks in the backwoods, it'd be done in no time."

"Huh!" grunted Nick, "I'd just like to have the fat contract for dredging out some of these muddy creeks. Say, mebbe a fellow wouldn't get rich on the job, eh? I think I'll have to

mention it to my dad, for he's keen on contracts, you know."

They passed a pleasant evening. Jimmy was easily induced to get out his banjo and give them many brisk tunes that seemed to just go with the plunkety-plunk of the joyous instrument.

"Seems like a banjo just chimes in with Southern scenes," remarked Herb.

"Oh! shucks! this ain't the Sunny South yet awhile, Herb," laughed Josh. "Wait till we get down in South Carolina, anyhow, where we'll run across some palmetto trees. That gives the real tropical flavor."

"If there were only some monkeys frisking about in the feathery tops, it'd add a heap to it, in my opinion," remarked Nick.

"Or a few coy mermaids," laughed Jack; "but then our friend here wouldn't find it quite so easy to climb to the top of a palmetto as to tumble overboard."

"Let up on that, won't you, Jack? It's mean, rubbing it in so hard," complained the object of the roar that followed.

In this way, then, the evening passed. As the mosquitoes began to get in their work later, the boys changed their minds, and concluded to sleep aboard, instead of on shore, as they had at first intended.

With the morning, things began to happen again. Breakfast was eaten first, and then Jack, who had been assisting George examine his motor, discovered the cause of the unfortunate stop, so that the freakish engine was now apparently all right again.

They crossed both the Machipongo Inlets without any accident, though it was evident that the skipper of the *Wireless* was more or less nervous, and kept hovering close to the other boats, with an eye on the ropes which they kept coiled in the stern.

And Nick also crouched down in the body of the boat, gripping some substantial part of the framework, with the grim air of one who had determined not to be pitched out into the water again, come what would.

Both heaved plain sighs of relief when the crossings were made without the least trouble. Cobb's Island now lay close by, and beyond were several more openings, where the sea connected with the shore waters. But these were small compared with those already navigated, and with a fair amount of caution they had no need to borrow trouble longer.

"There's what we're aiming to reach by evening, fellows!" remarked Jack, about the middle of the afternoon.

Following the direction in which his ex-

tended hand pointed, the others could see a lighthouse not a great way ahead, though it might take some time to reach it by way of winding connecting creeks.

"The great Cape Charles Light, ain't it, Jack?" demanded Herb.

"Just what it is," replied the commodore.

"Then, tomorrow we'll have to cross the mouth of the Chesapeake and arrive at Norfolk or Portsmouth; is that the programme?" asked George.

"If everything looks good to us, yes," replied Jack, seriously. "We want to take as few chances, you know, as we must. And that twenty miles is a big trip for our little craft. All depends on the wind and the sky. But there are always lots of boats around here; and if we got in a peck of trouble they'd help us out."

"That's a comfort," remarked Nick. "It was bad enough dropping overboard in that inlet, and I don't hanker to try it in the ocean itself. Excuse me, boys; I pass. I've shown you how to do the trick; some one else take the next try."

"We'll hope there isn't going to be any next, like the little boy's apple core," Jack laughed.

Then they had to drop into single file as

the channel narrowed again, with the pilot boat *Tramp* leading the way as usual.

"This is Smith Island, and the one on which the lighthouse is built. We ought to bring up there in short order now, when the mouth of the bay will be spread in front of us like a picture," Jack called, over his shoulder.

"All very nice," grumbled Nick; "but as for me, I'd much rather it was spread out *behind* us," and George doubtless echoed the thought, though too proud to show any nervousness over the prospective trip on the open sea.

At least Jack's prediction came true, for they did succeed in making the point of the island where the Cape Charles Light stood, a beacon to all vessels trying to enter the great Chesapeake Bay.

Far across the heaving waters lay Norfolk, Portsmouth, and Fortress Monroe, the Government station. Near here one of the most important naval engagements of the Civil War was fought, when Ericsson's "cheese on a raft," the *Monitor,* faced the terrible Confederate ironclad ram, *Merrimac,* and forced her to retire, after it seemed as though the entire wooden United States navy was to be at the mercy of the enemy.

No doubt many of these events thronged the minds of the four high school lads as they

stood there on the sandy beach looking across that stretch of sea toward the object of their expectation. And George, with Nick a good second, must have devoutly wished the labor of the next twenty-four hours were completed, with the little fleet at safe anchorage off the town of Norfolk, which they had determined to visit, so as to get their mail, and secure a few fresh supplies, since the hungry Nick was making a terrible hole in what they carried.

And on this October night they camped ashore under the gleaming Cape Charles Light.

CHAPTER XIII.

A SHOUT AT MIDNIGHT.

In the morning, after they had eaten an early breakfast, the boys called on the keeper of the light, and were allowed to climb to the top of the tower. Here a glorious panorama was spread before them, with many miles of the sea to the east, the sandy shore line stretching far to the dim north, and one of the most beautiful pictures opening out to the southwest, where lay Norfolk and those other places of interest, across twenty miles of green waters that glistened in the early October sunlight.

Jack asked many questions concerning tides and prevailing winds. He also noted the lay of the course they must follow in making their passage across to the other side.

The genial keeper gave him numerous points that might be of value. He also declared it as his opinion that they could not have a better day for the trip, as the sea was comparatively smooth, and the wind light, as well as from a favorable quarter.

And so the boys returned to their boats, determined to make the effort to cross while the chances were so much in their favor.

Nick was only waiting to be invited aboard the good old *Comfort;* and Jack, who believed that it would be better to have only one to occupy their attention in case anything went wrong with the untamed speed boat, asked George if he had any objections to letting his crew change ships, to which the other immediately replied that such a thing would please him immensely.

"I can manage her much better without a cargo, fellows," he declared, earnestly. "Now, listen to him, would you, calling me a cargo?" whimpered Nick; but while he thus pretended to be offended, it was laughable to see how quickly he made the transfer, as though afraid Jack might change his mind, or George want him to stay.

About nine o'clock the start was made, as the tide would be most favorable around that time, the lighthouse keeper had told them.

Since the *Comfort* had been overhauled she was capable of making better time than previously, when she was known as the "Tub" by the rest of the boys. Herb declared he could take her across in two hours, though Jack privately believed it would be nearer three before they reached Norfolk.

It turned out to be a hedge, just two and a half hours elapsing from the time they made

the start until they drew up near the big wharves at Norfolk.

However, time was not giving these happy-go-lucky lads the least uneasiness just at present, so long as they did reach port in safety.

"And it's just as well we started so early," Jack remarked, "because the wind is freshening all the while, and it will be blowing great guns out there before long.

"Hey, Josh! why not make a change again, and you get aboard the *Comfort?*" proposed Nick, who hated to give up a good thing.

"No you don't," retorted Josh, "not any for me. You just go and stew in your own gravy, will you? Took me a whole month to get the creak out of my bones after the last time you coaxed me to change places. Over you get, now, or else it's a ducking for yours, my boy," and Josh advanced in a warlike manner on the fat youth.

So, sighing like a martyr, Nick felt compelled to clamber into the speed boat.

"You ought to have one for your own sweet self," declared George, as he grasped the gunnel to keep from being tossed overboard, for Nick careened the boat dreadfully upon climbing in. "Why, you just don't know how fine the old *Wireless* acted on the way over, with only me aboard."

"I wish I did have a boat, as big as a house," declared Nick. "I'm wasting away to a mere shadow trying to keep my balance in this wedge. If I forget to breathe with both lungs at the same time he tells me I'm upsetting the equilibrium of the blessed thing. I feel most all the time like I'm the acrobat in the circus trying to stand on one toe on top of a flagpole."

After they had tied up, Herb was dispatched for the mail, while Jack went to buy a few provisions. Nick bombarded him with such a fearful list of things he wanted him to purchase that Jack had to thrust his fingers in his ears.

"What do you take me for, Nick, a dray horse?" he laughed. "I'd have to be, to carry the load you'd want. I've got a list of things we must have, and that's all I'll promise to lug down here. If you want anything else, you'll have to go after it yourself."

"All right, I'll do that," said Nick, promptly.

"Sure; and please tell me where you expect to stow all that truck?" demanded George, immediately, with a frown. "Not aboard the *Wirless,* I promise you, my boy. She's got all she can carry in hauling you around, without a sack of potatoes, a ham, and all that truck

you mentioned. Hire a float, and perhaps we'll tow it behind us."

Nick said not another word, being completely squelched, as Josh put it.

Leaving Norfolk, they started up the broad Elizabeth River, meaning to take the Albemarle and Chesapeake Canal, which had long ago been cut through the Great Dismal Swamp and connected with Currituck Sound, that noted ducking place where so many large gun clubs have their headquarters.

Entering this canal, they moved along steadily through the balance of the afternoon. On all sides lay the most interesting sights; for the moss hung heavily on the dismal-looking trees, and the boys thought they had never seen a more depressing picture than was now presented to their gaze.

"Say, Jack, do we get out of this place tonight?" asked Herb, who was not particularly fond of swamps and such ghostly places.

"No, we made out to start a little too late to get to the little river beyond before night sets in," Jack replied.

"But there's a pretty good sized moon now, you remember, and we might keep on. I'm afraid it'll give me the jim-jams to sleep in this horrible old swamp," Herb went on to say.

"Like to oblige you," laughed Jack; "but the fact is we're going to tie up mighty soon now. Only looking for a half way decent place."

"What's all the hurry?" grumbled the pilot of the *Comfort*.

"Look aloft and you'll soon see," came the reply, which caused Herb to cast his eyes upward.

"Holy smoke! we're going to get some storm, I take it!" he immediately exclaimed, as he saw heavy clouds mounting upward. "And to think that nobody discovered the fact but you, Jack. Yes, I reckon, then, we'll have to tie up, and get George's boat tent up before she comes. I'll just have to grin and bear it."

"That's the way to talk, Herb," said Josh. "What difference does it make to us, tight in our snug little hunting cabin? If anybody made a kick it ought to be the poor *Wirless* crew."

"Here, don't you waste your breath pitying us, now," flashed the jealous George, who could never bear to have any one but himself run his boat down.

There seemed but little choice of a camping place, since the shores of the canal proved to be pretty much alike; so presently Jack threw up his hand as a signal that he meant to stop,

and the three boats were soon being tied to trees.

"You'd think Herb expected a tornado, and wanted to make sure his old houseboat didn't get carried away," laughed George, as he watched the other secure both ends of the *Comfort* with cables, that he tested again and again.

"Oh, well, you never can tell," replied the other, without showing the least ill will; "and 'a stitch in time saves nine,' they taught me at home. 'What's worth doing at all is worth doing well', and sometimes it pays."

"It always pays in a contented mind," remarked Jack, who admired this positive trait in Herbert's nature, so different from George's flighty ways.

It was the case of the hare and the tortoise over again with these two; and while the speedy hare lay down to take a nap, confident of winning, the slow going tortoise was apt to come along and get to the goal first, after all.

The rain held off for a while, and they were able to cook supper ashore, though Josh kept an anxious eye on those dark clouds overhead while he worked.

"It's going to prove a big fizzle after all," remarked Nick, after a little water had come

down, and the moon peeped out of a break in the clouds.

"Perhaps so; you never can tell what the weather will do," Jack laughed. "But all the same we'll be apt to sleep aboard again, for fear it does rain before morning."

"You bet we will," remarked Herb; "at least this chicken does. Ugh! I'd wake up, and think a raft of snakes was creeping out of that old swamp there. Are you all of the same mind about bunking aboard?"

"If anybody will go me, I'll stay ashore," announced Nick, to the surprise of his chums; but then they knew the narrow confines of the speed boat cramped his ample form, and that explained his boldness. "That is, if George will only let me have his gun too."

"Sure I will, and only too glad," declared that worthy, eagerly. "I'd like to stretch all over the bally old boat myself, for once."

Jimmy took up Nick's offer, and so Jack set to work making them a rude sort of canopy that was calculated to shed water fairly well. It was composed of branches from nearby trees, and might be called a hunter's lean-to.

When the time came for retiring, the two boys lay down under this, drawing their blankets around them, for the night air was chilly.

"If it rains too hard, crawl in where you belong," was the last instruction Jack gave them before seeking the bed he had made in the *Tramp's* interior.

Later on all was silent about the camp on the canal. From the swamp near by various queer sounds might have been heard, had any one remained awake to listen; but as the boys were all pretty tired, no doubt they slept well.

It might have been in the middle of the night that Jack was aroused by a loud shout, which he recognized as coming from Nick. Wondering what it meant, he immediately started to climb out of the boat, gun in hand, when there came a tremendous report. Evidently Nick, whether he had seen something suspicious or was dreaming he did, had fired George's borrowed gun!

CHAPTER XIV.

NICK BAGS HIS GAME.

"Whoop! I got him!"

That was certainly Nick shouting in an exultant strain; and as Jack glanced in the direction of the lean-to he saw the fat boy hunching his pudgy figure out, gun in hand—for the moon had not yet set in the west.

Then Jack caught the sound of something struggling in the brush close by. Not knowing what it might prove to be, he was in no hurry to jump over that way.

"What did you shoot at, Nick?" he demanded, as the excited boy scrambled awkwardly to his feet, and appeared anxious to renew the engagement; at the same time Jack made sure to lay hold on the other's gun, lest he open fire recklessly.

"I d—d—don't know for sure," stammered Nick; "but it looked awfully like a tiger."

"What?" exclaimed Jack, astonished. "Why, don't you know there isn't such an animal in North America?"

"Might have been a striped skunk, Jack?" suggested Josh, who had poked his head out from the cabin of the *Comfort*.

"Or a zebra escaped from a menagerie," Herb remarked.

"All right, have all the fun you want, fellows," said Nick, doggedly; "but all the same, whatever it was, I got it."

"That's just what he did, boys, I reckon," Jack declared; "because you can hear it kicking its last over yonder in the bushes. Here, where's that lantern of ours, Jimmy? I let you have it, remember? Light up, and show me the way in there."

Jimmy quickly applied a match to the wick, and as the light flared up, he swung the lantern in his hand.

"Who's afraid?" he said, boldly, as he started toward the spot where silence now reigned. "Come along after me, Jack, darlint; and please remimber that if the beast springs at me, I depind on you to knock spots out of him. Keep back, the rest of ye, now, till we solve the puzzle."

Jack kept his gun in readiness, for there could be no telling what lay beyond that fringe of bushes.

"I do be seein' somethin' there on the ground, Jack. Looky yonder, honey, an' sure ye can't miss the same, by the token," Jimmy presently said, in a low, strained voice, as he pointed a trembling finger ahead.

"Yes, I see something," Jack admitted. "Go on, Jimmy, take a few more steps. No matter what a ferocious monster it may prove to be, I rather guess Nick nailed it with that charge of shot at close range."

They kept on advancing, and the nearer they drew the bolder Jimmy seemed to grow, until presently both boys stood over the victim of Nick's fire.

Then they broke out into a shout that made the weird echoes leap out of the depths of Dismal Swamp.

"Tare and ounds!" burst forth Jimmy, "if 'tisn't a shoat afther all he killed."

"Say rather a full grown razorback pig," laughed Jack, as he noted the sharp snout of the rooter, and its slab sides.

Jimmy immediately bent down and gripped the beast by one of its hind legs.

" 'Tis a roast of frish pork we'll be afther havin' the morrow," he declared. "They do be sayin' that these same Virginia pigs have the flavor of the bist Irish pork; an' I've always wanted to try the same. Think of Nick being the one to give us this trate. And if we iver run up against the owner, it's Nick must stand the cost. A tiger, did he say? He must have been saing double stripes the time."

When they backed into the camp, and the

defunct pig was shown, a chorus of yells arose form the balance of the crowd. Even Nick joined in the whooping.

"Laugh all you want to, fellows," he remarked, as he assumed a proud attitude, leaning on his gun as though posing for his picture, with that wild boar at his feet, as the spoils of the hunt. "I thought it was a wild beast about to attack the camp; and as the only one awake at the time, I believed it my solemn duty to give him both barrels, which I did. And what's more, you see that I got him. Now, what do you say about my marksmanship, Josh Purdue?"

"Not a word," returned that worthy, throwing up both hands. "Why, you peppered the poor beast from bow to stern. Won't we have a fine time picking the shot out of our teeth, if we try to eat him? But Jack, do they ever make use of such awful thin-looking hogs as this?"

"Of course, they do," replied the other, quickly. "All razorbacks are thin. They live in the woods and swamps, feeding on mast, which means acorns and nuts and sweet roots. That's what gives their flesh the sweet taste it has, a sort of gamey flavor, they say, though I never really ate part of a genuine razorback."

"But you will now, I hope," remarked Nick. "This is my treat, and I hereby cordially invite you, one and all, to partake with me when our chef has a chance to cook one of these fresh hams."

"He just wants us to be in it as deep as he is, so if the owner shows up we'll stand by him," chuckled Josh.

"Well, we ought to stand back of him," asserted Jack; "because Nick really rested under the belief that he was protecting the camp from the prowling monster. Of course, we accept your kind invite, Nick; and now, let's get back under the blankets as fast as we can, because it's kind of cool out here."

All of them made haste to do so save Nick, who lingered for some time to fairly gloat over his quarry. Seldom had the fat boy been enabled to bring down any species of game worth mentioning, so that his excitement was easily understood.

On the next morning Jack cut up the lean pig, having a fair knowledge of the methods employed in such a case. Of course, none of them just fancied living off some man's property, and if they could only find out who the owner of the razorback was they would have only too gladly paid whatever it was worth.

But whether they ever did find him out or

not, it would be a wicked shame to let all that sweet meat go to waste. And that very morning they had some pretty nice chops from the pig's ribs, which gave them a taste at any rate.

That morning they continued to move south through Currituck Sound. There were some ducks in sight, and more arriving, but only an occasional discharge of a gun came to their ears. Once Jack pointed to a wedge-shaped line of geese standing out against the clear sky far above, and heading still further south for some favorite feeding bar.

That night they camped on Roanoke Island, and the boys knew that they had made gallant progress through a portion of North Carolina.

"Tomorrow we will, I expect, get through Albemarle Sound, which is something like twenty-five miles in length," Jack remarked, as around a cheery fire that night they talked of what lay just before them.

"And after that, what?" questioned Herb.

"There's a lighthouse at the head of the narrower Croaton Sound, and if you look over there to the east right now you'll see the one on Body Island at Oregon Inlet. We've got to cross there first of all, you see."

"More inlets beyond that, are there?" asked George, trying to look indifferent.

"Two more before we reach Hatteras in Pamlico Sound, and known as New Inlet and Loggerhead. That last one is a hummer, too, I understand; but it can't be any worse than some we've successfully negotiated," Jack answered.

"Particularly that Watchapreague one," chuckled Josh, "where the jolly mermaids lie in wait to coax all handsome fellows overboard."

"Huh! that's right," remarked Nick; "and I noticed that you stayed aboard all right, Josh."

"Nothing to bother about with any of them, if only the boats behave half way decently," declared Jack. "If the engine of the *Wireless* hadn't balked just when it did, George wouldn't have had any trouble."

"And I'd have been saved my bath," chuckled Nick.

"But what of me, kind sors?" broke in Jimmy, in his thickest brogue, assumed, no doubt, for the occasion. "I'd have lost me chanct to win immortal glory. Didn't I be afther fillin' that beast of a shark with lead, so that his cronies they tore him into bits, an' devoured him in a jiffy. Give the divvle his dues, boys."

"Yes," Jack hastened to say, "give Jimmy

all that's coming to him, fellows. He deserves it," at which there was a roar.

Starting again in the morning, the southward run was resumed. All were now in a good humor. They seemed to be able to surmount any and all difficulties as fast as they arose; and this disposition made them lighthearted in the extreme.

One of the hams had been cooked in an oven on the preceding night, and proved to be very tender eating after all.

Albemarle Sound was passed, and the one beyond it. Even the dreaded Loggerhead Inlet proved to be a hollow mockery, in so far as giving them any real trouble went, for they crossed it with the utmost ease.

With several hours of daylight still ahead, they entered upon the great wide Pamlico Sound, which in places is all of twenty miles from shore to shore. As it is extremely shallow in many places, this body of water makes a treacherous sailing ground, and many a boat has met with disaster while navigating it.

They had not been an hour afloat on Pamlico before Jack was sorry he had started. Once more clouds had scurried above the horizon, and were mounting with great fleetness. And this time he believed that the storm would not

prove a tempest in a teapot, as the last one had turned out to be.

Vainly they looked about them for a haven of safety. There was absolutely no point of land where the water was of sufficient depth to allow of their finding a temporary harbor.

The clouds were climbing higher with a rapidity that told of the wind that must soon sweep across that wide body of water with cruel violence.

"Whew! perhaps we ain't in for it now!" called George, as he drew up closer to the others, to find out what Jack had to say; for strange as it might seem, when peril confronted the boys of the Motor Boat Club, they seemed to turn toward Jack with much the same confidence the needle shows in pointing directly to the north.

"What can we do, Jack?" asked Nick, in more or less alarm, as they plainly heard the distant growl of thunder; and in imagination the fat boy could see himself in the cranky speed boat, as she caught the full force of the wind, and turned turtle in the twenty-mile sound, amid the crash of the storm.

CHAPTER XV.

A WARM WELCOME TO THE STORMY CAPE.

There was no time to waste.

One last glance around told Jack the necessity for prompt action, if he wished to pull the little flotilla out of the bad hole in which they seemed settled.

The storm was racing up from the southwest, beyond the distant mainland. Consequently, the eastern side of the great shallow sound would presently become a boisterous place for craft the size of theirs.

"We've got to head into it, fellows!" was his decision, as he began to change the course of the *Tramp* to conform with his views.

It looked like heroic treatment, but neither Herb nor George murmured. They saw what the commodore had in mind, and that every mile they were able to forge ahead would decrease the peril. Indeed, if they could only manage to reach a point close in to that western shore, they would escape the brunt of the rising waves, and only have to think of holding their own against the wind itself.

"Full speed, *Comfort!*" called Jack, waving an encouraging hand toward the other.

Now George found himself perplexed as to what his course should be. He knew he could make almost twice the speed that the lumbering broad beam boat was able to display at her best. The question was, did he dare risk it?

True, the *Wireless* was in more danger out on that wide stretch than any of the others, and it seemed good policy for him to speed for shelter. But what if one of those exasperating breakdowns, to which the mechanism of the narrow boat seemed subject, should take place without warning?

George shuddered as he contemplated such a possibility. He could easily imagine his feelings upon being cast helplessly adrift in the midst of a raging gale, with his tried and true chums hidden from his sight by the rain and blowing spindrift.

And so his decision was quickly made. Of the two evils he chose what seemed to be the lesser. He would stick to the fleet. Then, in case of trouble, they could help each other like comrades.

Jack had kept an eye on the *Wireless*, for he guessed that just this puzzling question would come up for George to solve. And when he failed to see the speed boat shooting away, leaving the others in the lurch, he understood

that the wise skipper had decided on the better way.

They were making fine headway, but all the same the storm was doing likewise; and unfortunately, at the time, they happened to be quite a few miles away from the shore that promised shelter.

"What ails George, do ye know?" questioned Jimmy, who could not understand why the other did not make with all speed ahead, as he had been known to do on a former occasion, considering that the best course.

"That sudden stop on the part of his engine gave him a bad feeling," was Jack's reply. "He doesn't trust it as he did, and is afraid that it may repeat when he is in the midst of the storm. So he's going to stick by us, through thick and thin."

"It does his head credit, I'm thinkin'," declared Jimmy; and then, as he stared hard into that inky space ahead, that was gradually creeping up toward them, he continued: "Sure now, do ye think we can make it, Jack darlint?"

"Well, we've just got to, that's all," the other replied, firmly. "If the wind doesn't blow us right out of the water, we'll keep on bucking directly into it. The fight will be a tough one, Jimmy; but make up your mind we

must win out. Half the battle is in confidence —that and eternal watchfulness."

It was in this manner that Jack Stormways always impressed his chums with some of the zeal by which his own actions were governed. That "never-give-up" spirit had indeed carried him through lots of hotly contested battles on the gridiron or the diamond, wresting victory many times from apparent defeat.

So they continued to push steadily on. Jack counted every minute a gain. He kept a close watch upon the surface of the sound, knowing that here they must first of all discover the swoop of the gale, as its skirmishing breath struck the water.

The last movement of air seemed to have died out, yet this was the calm that often precedes the coming of the storm, the deadly lull that makes the tempest seem all the more terrible when it breaks.

Jack calculated that they had been some five miles from the western shore at the time they changed their southern course, and headed to starboard. And as *Comfort* could do no better than ten miles an hour, under the most favorable conditions, it stood to reason that about half an hour would be needed to place them in a position of safety.

"We won't get it, that's flat," he was saying

to himself, as he noted the way in which the clouds gathered for the rush.

Picking up the little megaphone which he carried, he shouted a few sentences to the others. While the air around them remained so calm, the thunder was booming in the quarter where that black cloud hung suspended, so that talking was already out of the question unless one used some such contrivance for aiding the voice.

"George, better fall in just ahead of us, where we can get a line to you in case you have engine trouble. Two sharp blasts will tell us that you want help. Herb, try and keep as close to me as is safe! We must stick it out together, hear?"

Both of the other skippers waved their hands to indicate that they understood, and doubtless George was given fresh courage to find how calm and confident Jack seemed to face the approaching difficulty.

The land was now less than two miles away, and a faint hope had begun to stir in Jack's heart that there might be enough delay to allow their reaching a point of safety.

This, however, was dissipated when he suddenly discovered a white line that looked as though a giant piece of chalk had been drawn along the water. The squall had pounced

down upon Pamlico, and was rushing toward them at the rate of at least a mile a minute.

"Hold hard!" shouted Jack through his megaphone.

Then he devoted himself to engineering the *Tramp's* destiny. Jimmy knew what was expected of him in the emergency, and was nerved to acquit himself with credit. While his skipper showed himself to be so cool and self-possessed Jimmy could not think of allowing the spasm of fear that passed over him to hold sway. What if that line of foamy water was increasing in size as it rushed at them, until it assumed dreadful proportions? The *Tramp* had passed safely through other storms, and with Jack at the wheel all must be serene.

So Jimmy crouched there at the motor, ready to do whatever he was told—crouched and gaped and shivered, yet with compressed teeth was resolved to stand by his shipmate to the end.

Then the foam-crested water struck the flotilla with a crash. First the narrow *Wireless* was seen to surge forward, rear up at a frightfully perpendicular angle, until it almost seemed as though the frail craft must be hurled completely over; and then swoop furiously down into the basin that followed the comber.

George held her firmly in line, and somehow managed to keep her head straight into the shrieking wind, though he frankly confessed that his heart was in his mouth when she took that header.

But almost at the same instant the other boats tried the same frightful plunge, and they, too, survived. Jack gave a sigh of relief when he saw that all of them had passed through the preliminary skirmish unharmed, for it had been that which gave him the greatest concern.

And now the work began in earnest. They had to fight for every foot they won against the combined forces of wind and wave. Had they been a mile or so further out in the sound, so that the seas had a better chance to become monstrous, nothing could have saved any of them. And Jack's chums once again had reason to be thankful for the far-seeing qualities which their commodore developed when he changed their course, and headed into the teeth of the coming gale.

At least several things favored them now. George's boat seemed to be behaving wonderfully well, for one thing. Then again, after that first swoop the gale had slackened somewhat in intensity, as is frequently the case; though presently they could expect it to be-

come more violent than ever, when it caught its second wind, as Jerry expressed it.

Then, another hopeful thing was the fact that with every yard passed over they were really getting the benefit of drawing closer to the shore that was serving as a sort of shield from the wind.

The seas too gradually declined, since there was lacking the water necessary to build them up.

Jack had one thing to worry over. He knew that on such occasions considerable water would be swept from the western side of the sound, and this was apt to send the boats aground unless luck favored them. Such a condition would keep them from going further in any great distance, since the risk of striking became too pronounced.

"It's all right, Jimmy!" he called to his helper, knowing how anxious the latter must necessarily be; "we've got to a point now where we're safe. We could even drop our mudhooks over right here, and ride it out, if we wanted. But it's better to go on a little further."

"Whoo! wasn't the same a scorcher, though?" Jimmy shouted, a sickly grin coming over his good-natured, freckled face.

"It was some wind, I'm thinking," Jack

admitted. "I wasn't a bit afraid about the *Tramp* or the *Comfort,* but there's no telling what that trick boat, *Wireless,* will do, when you don't expect it. But everything is lovely, and the goose hangs high."

"Sure it will, if ever ye get a sight on one with that bully little gun; and it was poor hungry Nick I heard sayin', by the same token, that he liked roast goose better than anything in the woide worrld except oysters!"

Ten minutes later and Jack blew a blast upon his conch shell horn that told the others they were to come to anchor. Whereupon there was more or less hustling, as the crews got busy.

Presently the three little motor boats rode buoyantly to their anchors, bobbing up and down on the rolling waves like ducks bowing to each other. And as they had made out to select positions within the safety zone of each other, it was possible for those aboard to hold conversations, if they but chose to elevate their voices more or less, in order to be heard above the shrieking wind and dashing waves.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE WIRELESS AS TRICKY AS EVER.

"We're in for a bad night, Jack!" called George, some time later on; while poor Nick hung over the side of the wobbling speed boat, and looked forlorn indeed.

"You are, in that contraption, George; but the rest of us don't give a hang whether the old storm holds on or not. We expect to get busy cooking supper right soon now, as these bully little Juwel stoves will burn, no matter how the boats jump up and down."

"Oh! I wish Herb would only open his heart, and invite me to spend the night on board the good reliable old *Comfort!*" groaned Nick.

"Sure! Come right along; plenty of room for three here. George can tuck in, too, if he says the word," called Herb, cheerily.

"What! desert my boat in time of need? What do you take me for?" cried George, with a great show of righteous indignation; but as for Nick, he became so excited, Jack feared he would jump in, and try to swim across.

By letting out more cable George was enabled to swing his boat close enough to the

big craft to allow of Josh seizing hold; and while he thus held on clumsy Nick managed to crawl aboard, though he came within an ace of taking a bath, and would have done so, only that Herb gave him a helping hand.

Then George pulled back again to his former position. If he felt that he was making something of a martyr of himself, in thus determining to stick by the madly plunging *Wireless* all night, George was too proud to indicate as much. He might suffer all sorts of discomforts, and never breathe a word of complaint.

But the storm proved short-lived after all.

Before they began to think of making up their beds the wind had slackened in violence, and the clouds showed signs of breaking. Indeed, as Jack pulled the blanket over him, he could see that the moon was peeping out from behind the black curtains overhead.

"It'll be a fairly decent night after all, Jimmy," he muttered; but as there was no answer, he took it for granted that his mate had passed into slumberland by the short route; indeed, Jimmy had a faculty for getting to sleep almost as soon as his head touched his pillow, which in this case was an inflated rubber one.

And as the night wore on, the tossing of the

boats became less and less, until along about three in the morning Jack, chancing to awaken, found that the little *Tramp* lay perfectly quiet on the bosom of the big sound.

He could see out, and looking toward the southeast beheld the glow of that great beacon marking the position of the most stormy cape along the whole Atlantic coast—Hatteras.

In the morning they were not long in getting under way, as soon as breakfast had been hurried through with, and Nick had to get aboard his own boat again, for his services were needed by his skipper.

Across the sound they sped at a clipping rate, heading direct for the sandy spit where the lighthouse stands. The roar of the ocean beating against that barrier that has kept it out for ages came strongly to their ears, as the breeze changed with the turn of the tide.

Landing among the sand dunes near the light, they paid a visit to the keeper, and met with a cordial reception. As a rule strangers are not allowed to trespass upon Government property; but such a fine lot of lads seemed to appeal to the heart of the keeper, who took them up to the top of the tower, in order to let them have a view of what lay before them to the south.

They listened to his stories of famous

wrecks that had strewn the neighboring beaches with dismembered portions of gallant ships and steamers for fifty years; and looking out on the ocean to where the treacherous reefs lay, waiting for fresh victims, Jack could easily picture the tragic scenes that were being described, even though at that time the sun chanced to be shining brightly, and the sea fairly smooth.

Then again a start was made, for some difficult cruising lay ahead before they could hope to reach Beaufort, where a little rest would be taken, in order to carry out the promise they had made the young aviator, Malcolm Spence.

They had heard ugly stories about Hatteras Inlet. It was said to have treacherous currents, and to abound in fierce man-eating sharks. Hence George became more or less concerned as they bore down upon it on this same morning.

But like a good many other things in this world, the expectation of trouble proved to be of far greater proportions than the actual experience. Why, they passed over without the slightest difficulty. Even Nick shouted in great glee when the dreaded inlet was a thing of the past, and he waved his fat hand disdainfully back toward it as they sped away.

"It was dead easy, fellows!" he exclaimed. "Why, I just shut my eyes, and counted twenty. Then, when I opened them again, we were across!" and Nick hardly knew why his innocent confession of alarm was greeted by such uproarious shouts.

"But the sharks were there, all roight, beca'se I saw the muttherin' critters pokin' their ould fins out of the wather!" declared Jimmy.

"That's right, I saw the same," admitted Herb.

The next crossing would be at Ocracoke Inlet. And then beyond that they would come to Portsmouth, where mail from home might be expected, since they had laid out a regular plan whereby those so dear to their boyish hearts—the home folks—could communicate with the wanderers. And at each place Jack, or one of the others, left word to have all delayed mail forwarded on.

"Sure we do be getting closer all the while to that same ould Beaufort, where ye expect to discover the gintleman by the name of Van Arsdale Spence," Jimmy was remarking, as the flotilla moved majestically on in one-two-three order, the *Wireless* leading for the time being.

"We ought to get there some time tomorrow," Jack answered. "Tonight the plan is to

camp on Cedar Island, and that is in Cove Sound, where Beaufort is located."

"And then we'll know what the wonderful letter contains. It's bothered me more'n a little to guess, even though I knowed right well I had no business to think of it at all. But there's George pointing to somethin' ahead."

"Yes, he sees the rough water of Ocracoke Inlet, and is falling back," laughed Jack, who was amused when the usually reckless skipper of the speed boat developed a cautious vein.

George was learning something by slow degrees, and this might be set down to be the truth of that old proverb to the effect that the race is not always to the swift. Perhaps, if he ever had another boat built to order, he would not sacrifice safety and comfort to the mad desire to make fast time.

But Ocracoke proved no harder to negotiate than had Hatteras. Perhaps it might be that experience was teaching the young motor boat cruisers just how to manage their craft when passing these dangerous openings, where the sweep of the sea had a full chance to strike them.

Then came Portsmouth, where Jimmy was dispatched for the mail, as well as some necessary food supplies. They all had such good

appetites, save perhaps Josh, for whose lack Nick more than made up, that it was simply amazing how things just seemed to melt away. But then six boys can always be depended upon to devour their own weight in "grub" during a short cruise upon the water. The salty air seemed to make them hungry all the time, so that it became necessary to piece between regular meals.

Jack timed their departure from Portsmouth so as to break into Cove Sound, and reach Cedar Island, before night came on. Somehow he had set his mind in making a camp here. Possibly he had read of some former lone boatman doing the same, for he had devoured several books containing descriptions of this inland passage.

As nothing happened to disturb his plans, they drew up for the night at Cedar Island, an hour and more before the sun would set.

This gave them plenty of chances to do a number of things that happened to appeal to them individually. George went ashore to stretch his cramped legs, whither Nick had of course preceded him, leaving the *Wireless* at anchor just beyond the other two boats.

And George took his gun with him, thinking there might be a chance to pick up some shore birds, in the way of snipe or curlew.

Jack was bent on trying to get a mess of fish for supper, and noting what seemed to be a promising place close by, he set to work. They saw him pull in several finny captives; and Nick would rub his stomach in mute delight every time the patient angler made a strike, as he viewed the possibilities of a prospective feast.

Josh was busy making a fireplace out of some stones he picked up. It always did him great good to have things fixed to suit his ideas of what a cooking fire ought to be when in camp. It was fast becoming a hobby with Josh; and yet, strange to say, with all his ability in the line of cookery, he was often unable to partake of his own savory messes on account of his disposition toward indigestion.

Herb seemed to be whittling something out of a piece of nice wood he had found; while Jimmy, always good-natured, and willing to be the "handy boy" of the bunch, gathered wood for the cook.

They heard George shoot a number of times, and new hope began to take hold of Nick, who, moving closer to Josh, commenced quizzing him on how shore birds ought to be cooked, in order to bring out their particular flavor. Nick was never happier than when engaged in his favorite conversation concerning appe-

tizing things to eat. Indeed, there was only one thing he liked better; and this was to indulge in the actual demonstration itself, and devour the finished product of the cook's skill.

Suddenly Jimmy gave a yell. The others started up, thinking that perhaps Jack had made an unusually fine haul, or been pulled in himself by a large fish. George was just breaking through the scrub near by, and he echoed the shout of Jimmy.

"Look at the *Wireless,* would you, fellows? Say' she's bewitched, that's what!" was what he whooped, as he started to run toward them.

And as they turned their eyes in the direction of the erratic speed boat, what was their amazement to see the little craft moving away at a fast pace, although the engine was quite dead and cold, and not the first sign of a human being could be detected aboard.

It was a mystery that sent a cold chill through every heart!

CHAPTER XVII.

GOOD-BYE TO AN ANCHOR.

"Who's playing this trick on me?" demanded George, as he reached the others.

"Look around and you'll see we're all here, with Jack running like mad this way," observed Herb, indignantly.

"But what in the Sam Hill ails the bally old boat, then?" exclaimed George, as he turned his eyes again on the fast receding *Wireless,* that was heading out from the shore.

"It's some trick of a native cracker; he's swimming under water, and pulling the boat after him. We've got to get in the other boats and give chase," declared shrewd Josh.

"It's mighty queer, that's all!" gasped Nick; while Jimmy stood as if turned into stone, his eyes round with fear and superstitition, for Jimmy had inherited the regular Irish belief in banshees and ghosts.

George made a dash for the nearest boat, which happened to be the *Tramp.*

"Wait for me!" shouted the owner of that craft, who was putting on a spurt in order to reach them quickly, having forgotten all about

his finny prizes in this new and overwhelming discovery.

He came up on the run, but already Herb was in the *Comfort,* about to start the engine.

"No need, Herb," gasped Jack, "George and myself can overtake it with the *Tramp.* The rest of you stay here."

"But glory be, what ails the ould thing?" demanded Jimmy, determined not to let the commodore get away without some explanation of the puzzle.

"Why, don't you understand?" said Jack, as he busied himself with the motor. "A big fish, perhaps a wandering shark, has fouled the anchor rope, and getting badly rattled, has put off at full speed, dragging the boat after him. He's headed for the nearest inlet at this very minute; but we'll beat him at that little game, won't we, George?"

Then the rattle of the motor sounded, and immediately the *Tramp* set off in the wake of the runaway motor boat.

A more surprised lot of boys it would have been difficult to find than those thus left upon the little sandy beach on Cedar Island. They stared after the two boats, and then turned to look at each other.

"Well, did you ever?" gasped Nick.

"Beats Bannigher, so it does," declared

Jimmy, though it could be seen that a humorous expression had taken the place of that look of fear on his freckled face.

"A shark got mussed up in the anchor rope, and then set out to steal the whole outfit!" remarked Herb. "Well, of all the funny things, don't that take the cake, though?"

"That silly old boat of George's seems to me is always cutting up some sort of capers. She's the toughest proposition ever," Josh declared.

"That's what I'm saying all the blessed time," grunted Nick, unconsciously beginning to feel of his various joints, as though the mere mention of the *Wireless* made him remember his aches.

"But can they overtake the measly thing?" Josh asked, watching nervously to see if he could determine how the race was progressing.

"Just because the *Wireless* is the faster boat, don't think Jack isn't going to run her down, hand over fist," declared Herb. "Already he's gaining on the other. You see, the shark isn't used to towing a boat like that at race-horse speed. And then the anchor bothers him some, I bet you."

"Will George shoot the monster—for I take it a shark must be of pretty good size to run

away with a motor boat like that?" Josh inquired.

"Watch and see what happens. George has his gun in his hands, and seems to be looking over, as if he'd just like to shoot; but pshaw! the shark will stick to the bottom right along, and he can't be touched."

It was evident to them all that unless some other line of action was brought into play the pursuers would have a pretty hard time of it outwitting the thief that refused to show himself near the surface.

But they knew Jack would be equal to any occasion, and it was with more or less curiosity rather than alarm that those ashore stood there, watching, and waiting to see the close of the exciting little drama.

"There, George has put down his gun; and I reckon Jack told him it was no good trying to cop the old pirate that way. Now what's he doing, fellows?" Nick remarked.

"I saw the sunlight shine on something he's got in his hand," declared Herb.

"That's roight," Jimmy observed, with conviction. "And it's a knife he is howldin', so it is."

"Oh! my goodness gracious! I hope that foolish and rash George isn't thinking of going overboard, and engaging the man-eater in a

fight, just like I've read those pearl divers do!" Nick gasped.

"Rats! what d'ye think George is made of to play such a foolish game?" Jimmy cried. "It's to cut the anchor rope the laddy buck means to thry!"

"That's right, Jimmy; and you can be sure it was Jack put him wise to that," Herb broke in with.

"But," Nick went on, still half dazed, "he'll never see his blessed old anchor any more, will he? The blooming old shark will run off with it."

"Let him," laughed Josh, in derision. "Better to lose a measly anchor than have the boat go to smash. Looky, fellows, he's going to do it right now!"

Every one of them stared as hard as he could. The two boats had not gone so far off but what a pair of good eyes could observe what was taking place, even though night was coming on apace, with some clouds gathering overhead.

Jack had run the *Tramp* alongside the erratic runaway, and George was seen to clamber aboard his own boat. Of course, after that it would be a simple job to press the keen edge of Jack's knife upon the strained anchor rope.

"He did it!" shouted Jimmy, as the *Wire-*

less was noticed to fall suddenly behind the other craft, as though relieved from the unseen force that had been towing her away at such a headlong pace.

And presently the speed boat was seen to move of her own accord, George having turned his engine, and thrown on power.

They came back side by side, the skippers laughing heartily at the harmless end of what had at one time threatened to prove a calamity.

"No harm done except that I must buy a new cable and anchor at Beaufort," said George, as he once more drew up by the side of the *Comfort*.

"I've got a spare rope I can lend you till then," spoke up Herb, who liked to fish up all manner of contraptions from the depths of the roomy craft, and see the surprise written on the faces of his chums.

So, after all, the excitement died out, though they would never forget their amazement at seeing the boat rushing off without any visible reason for its flight.

Jack went back and secured the finny prizes that he had taken, upon which Josh set Jimmy to work, as the Irish boy was a master hand at cleaning fish. George, it turned out, had knocked down a whole covey of small birds,

and several of them got busy plucking the feathers from these.

Nick was willing to do what he could, but truth to tell, he proved so clumsy at the task that it took him the whole time to get just one little bird ready, while Jack and Herb did six apiece.

Of course, they feasted that night, and considerable of the talk around the camp-fire concerned the late adventure.

"It might have been much more serious," George declared.

"That's a fact," added Josh, wagging his long head, solemnly, as was his custom. "Suppose now that same thing had happened in the middle of the night? Whew! we never would have known what had become of the blessed old *Wireless*. Jimmy here would have said the ghosts had carried her off."

"Even if that shark had had a better start he might have given us a long chase before we caught him. And you fellows saw how quick it got dark tonight, with the clouds hanging over us," George continued.

"What would you have done in that case, Jack?" asked Nick.

"Do you mean if we found ourselves far out on the dark sound?" laughed the one addressed. "Why, I reckon we could have heard

you shout; and if that failed there was the fire. Oh, I don't doubt we'd have found some way to get back here, all in good time!"

By ten o'clock the sky had cleared again, so that they concluded to keep to the original plan, which included a night ashore. George was seen to pay particular attention about fastening his boat to the others with an extra cable.

"He's meaning to make things secure," chuckled Josh.

"Yes, one experience is quite enough for George, sometimes," commented Herb. "If another shark gets the fever, and tries to run away with an anchor, he's just got to take the entire bunch."

"Yes, and the whole island in the bargain, because they've fastened the boats to that tree, you notice," Josh observed.

Their hopes of a good, quiet night suffered no blight, for nothing happened to disturb their sleep, and morning found them eager to go on.

They fully expected reaching Beaufort before long now, when the mysterious little packet could be delivered to the party to whom it was addressed, if they were fortunate enough to find him. Young Spence did not seem to be sure that this Van Arsdale Spence still lived near Beaufort, as he evidently once

had done; but still Jack had hopes of succeeding, since they seemed to carry such luck along with them.

It was eight o'clock when they got started. As usual, George detained them, finding occasion to do some more little necessary tinkering with that miserable engine of his, that was forever getting out of order.

Cove Sound lay shimmering in the sunlight as the three little boats left the friendly beach of Cedar Island, and once more cut a passage through the water, with their prows turned southward.

It was a beautiful morning.

"I only hope," Jack had said at starting, "that it is a good omen, and that we will be able to get on the track of the party without too much delay."

And so they started on the last leg that was to take them to Beaufort.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A SIGNAL OF DISTRESS.

They made such fair speed that, as noon came along, they realized they could reach the little city on the sound. Once or twice Jack had been tempted to turn in to the shore, especially when he saw what looked to be a very pretty plantation, with the house having a red roof, and nestling in among many trees, for the idea had occurred to him that he might just happen on some valuable information concerning the party whom they sought.

But it ended in his determining that on the whole he had better curb his impatience until reaching Beaufort. At the postoffice he might get in touch with some one who knew.

When they pulled in they had eaten a little bite of cold stuff, as it was not their intention to stop to cook anything.

Jack himself set off for the postoffice, to secure what mail awaited them, and at the same time make certain inquiries.

"Can you tell me anything about a certain party named Van Arsdale Spence?" he asked the postmaster, after receiving several letters.

The other looked at him closely.

"He used to live near here," he said, finally.

"Yes, we understood that, and I want to find him very much," Jack went on.

"You passed his old home as you came here, and perhaps you noticed the house in among the trees, the one with the red-tiled roof?"

"Why, of course we did!" Jack exclaimed, "and I was tempted to put in there, to make inquiries, but changed my mind. Then we must turn back, and go there?"

The postmaster shook his head.

"Wouldn't do any good, young man. Mr. Spence no longer lives there," he said.

"Do you happen to know where he could be found, sir? I have a very important message to deliver to him, which I promised to hand over while we were passing along this section of the coast."

To the surprise of Jack the official looked grave.

"The rules of the department are very strict, sir, and prevent me from telling you where Mr. Spence gets his mail now." Then seeing Jack's look of bitter disappointment, and partly relenting, he continued: "But there's a party over yonder who knows just as well as I do, and is under no restrictions either. A

drink, or a quarter, would do the business with Pete Smalling."

"Thank you; I'll make the try anyway," and Jack hurried across to where he saw a rather disreputable citizen standing leaning against a fence, chewing a straw.

"Excuse me, are you Pete Smalling?" he asked, as he came up.

The cracker looked him over, and then grinned. Evidently he recognized that the other was a stranger in the community. Perhaps, too, he scented two bits, and later on a happy time in his favorite tavern taproom.

"Them's my name, Mistah; what kin I do foh yuh?" he remarked, with the true Southern accent.

"I want to see a certain party named Van Arsdale Spence, and the postmaster told me you would know and could direct me."

Jack managed in some way to slip a piece of silver into the hand of the other. It had the result of making him talkative.

"He was right, stranger, I does happen tuh know thet same, an' kin take yuh tuh whah Mistah Spence is aholin' out right now. Yuh see, it's tuh the south o' hyah, quite a peart ways, p'raps half hour er more."

"Could you tell us exactly where?" demanded the boy.

"Wall, now, I reckon I knows, but she's thet hard tuh tell. Gut a boat, Mistah, aint yuh?" Pete went on.

"Yes, we've got three power boats with us. Could you pilot us to where Mr. Spence is to be found?" Jack went on, beginning to understand how profitable it was to know a thing, and yet be quite unable to describe its location.

"Cud I? Wall, nothin' is surer than thet same, suh; allers pervided yuh made it wuth my time. I'm ginerally a busy man, yuh see, suh."

Jack thought he must be, as long as he had a dime in his pocket with which to pay for the stuff he guzzled; but then that was no affair of his right then; what he wanted was to find Spence.

"Would a dollar pay you for showing us?" Jack asked, with an air of business that no doubt impressed the loafer.

"Jest consider me engaged, Mistah. Take me tuh yer boat; on'y its gut tuh be understood that I'm tuh be fetched back heah again. If Spence cain't bring me, yuh promise tuh do hit, do yuh?"

"Yes, I guess I'm safe in making that promise. Then come along with me down to the water front. The sooner we start the better."

Jack went on, believing in the old maxim that causes one to strike while the iron is hot.

"But I hain't had any dinner," said the fellow, with a cunning leer.

"Oh! we'll see that you get plenty to eat on the way. No use waiting here. Our time is limited, and we want to be going. Will you come along?" Jack said.

"Thet's all right, Mistah; yuh kin count on me, suh. A whole dollah yuh sed, didn't yuh, suh; and make out tuh git me back in Beaufort agin?"

"Yes, a dollar and a return ticket. Come along."

On the way Jack made several purchases that caused the hungry Pete to lick his chops, and hope he would be able to soon meet up with that promised lunch, for he was getting more and more hungry now with every passing minute. That twenty-five cents in his pocket felt like it weighed a ton, too, and he wondered if the young fellow, who he saw was a Northerner or a Yankee, as all such are called below Mason and Dixon's line, would wait for him while he exchanged it in a saloon.

But Jack hurried along, so that they arrived at the place where the three boats had been tied up before Pete could quite make up his mind what he ought to do.

Jack determined that he had not returned any too soon. A little crowd of rowdies had gathered near, and were beginning to make remarks about the boats and those aboard. Beaufort was no different from any other place, north or south; there are always some rough characters to be found, and when the town lies on the water it is generally the case that they frequent the landings.

George was sitting on deck, apparently shining up his gun. Jack knew, however, that this was all pretense, and that his chum wanted to let it be known that those in the motor boat flotilla were well armed, and, moreover, knew how to take care of themselves.

Pete was taken aboard the *Tramp,* because Jack wanted to talk with him while on the way. Then the start was made. Just as Jack had anticipated, some of the fellows on the shore called insultingly after them.

"Don't pay any attention to them," he cautioned his mates.

It was hard to stand being abused without having done the least thing to deserve such treatment, but all the boys knew the wisdom of controlling their tempers under provocation.

Then, finding that no attention was paid to their remarks, the fellows started to hurling stones after the boats. Fortunately, when they

thought of this means for making a display of their rowdyism, the small craft had gained such headway that they could not reach them with the missiles. Several splashed water aboard and came near striking home, but Jack breathed easy when he realized that they had passed beyond range of the missiles.

"That's a fine bunch of scoundrels," he said, partly to Jimmy.

"They don't mean any harm, Mistah; that's on'y th' way they hes o' havin' fun," Pete remarked, at which Jimmy laughed scornfully.

"Fun, is it?" he said, with a gleam of anger in his blue eyes; "sure it's little the big trotters'd care if one of thim stones would be after hittin' us on the head and knocking the daylight out of us. Fun, do ye say? It'd give me great pleasure, so it would, to have a chanct to teach some of thim manners. An' I could do it, too, d'ye mind, for all I'm but a broth of a bhoy."

Jack began to ask a few questions of the fellow, whom Jimmy had soon supplied with an abundance of food.

"It's on'y a few miles tuh whar Mistah Spence holds out now, suh, an' we kin git thar right peart in this fine little boat," the other was saying, when Jimmy broke into the conversation by exclaiming:

"Looky yonder, Jack, darlint; d'ye twig the two gossoons wagging a handkerchief at us? Holy smoke! I belave they've got a motor boat half under water, and do be havin' an accident of some sort. How now, Commodore, do we be after puttin' in to the rescue?"

"You're right, Jimmy," remarked Jack, "they have got a boat of some kind partly filled. Perhaps they went too near the shore and got snagged on a stump or a rock. But we just can't pass them by and pretend we don't see them. Listen, one is yelling."

"Help! we're wrecked! Come ashore and take us off!" came the call.

"Hang the luck!" remarked George, "what else is going to detain us? Seems to me we've just done nothing but hold out a helping hand ever since we started on this blooming trip."

"But you know the rules of the road, and the law of the cruiser—'do as you'd be done by,'" said Jack, who had changed his course and was heading straight for the shore, where the two men stood up to their knees in water beside their partly submerged motor boat.

"We hit something, and punched a hole in the boat," one of them explained, as Jack and his chums came up.

"And if you'd only give us a lift a few miles we'd be very grateful, and would gladly pay

for what it was worth," the other, who looked like a lawyer, hastened to say.

"That's all right, gentlemen," Jack remarked, hospitably. "Climb aboard the big boat. We're only going a short distance, however, to a little place where Van Arsdale Spence is now living."

The two pilgrims who had been wrecked looked at each other in surprise.

"Why," said the shorter one, who seemed to be a man of some authority, perhaps a marshal, or even a sheriff of the county, "that's queer, but we're bound for that same place ourselves, strangers!"

CHAPTER XIX.

THE MESSAGE OF HOPE.

"Do you mean that you were on your way to see Mr. Spence at the time your boat struck a snag?" asked Jack, surprised and perplexed at the same time.

"That's just what we were, my boy," replied the other, looking curiously at Jack, as though naturally wondering what sort of mission could be taking this flotilla of Northern motor boats to visit the party in question.

Jack would have liked to ask questions, but realized that such a course would be bordering on the impudent. There might be numerous people interested in Van Arsdale Spence besides the young aviator whom they had agreed to assist by carrying the packet to the coast town.

"In that case you have only to remain aboard here, and we will land you. I have a pilot with me, to lead us right," he remarked.

"So I see, old Pete Smalling, eh? Hello! Pete, struck a job at last, after looking for ten years?" remarked the man, winking at the hungry passenger, who was disposing of his food at a prodigious rate of speed.

"I reckon as I hev, Mistah Marshal," answered the other, with considerable of respect in his voice and manner.

So Jack knew his surmise was correct, and that the heavy-set individual was an officer of the law, after all. But what he could be going to see Spence for, was of course beyond his power to guess. The planter who had owned that fine place now seemed to be living in what might be called seclusion. Had he done anything for which he could be taken to task by the law? Jack hoped not, for the sake of that fine young aviator, Malcolm Spence, who must surely be some relative, and was deeply interested in his welfare.

The boats moved on in company, so that it was possible to converse back and forth if any of them so desired.

"I suppose this Mr. Spence must have lived around here quite some time?" Jack remarked a little later, as the man smiled encouragingly toward him.

"All his life, suh, all his life. He was born on that spot north of Beaufort; yes, and his father before him, I reckon. It never has gone out of the hands of the Spences up to now," came the ready reply.

"Oh! by the way, did this gentleman ever have any family?" asked Jack.

"I should reckon he did that, suh—three fine gals, an' just one son. The gals they stick by him through it all; but the boy, he left the old man goin' on two yeahs now. It's nigh about broke his heart, I heah."

"I don't suppose that this son's name could have been Malcolm?" suggested Jack, pretty sure of his ground now.

"That's just what it was, suh, Malcolm Gregory Spence. They was a time when we all 'spected he was going to make something out of himself, because you see the boy was mighty clever; but he quarreled with his old man and went off. P'raps he's dead by now. The old man thinks so, leastways; though one of the gals don't seem to believe that way."

Jack could see it all. In some way, Malcolm, estranged from his family, had managed to learn about their recent financial troubles, and that they had left the old home, to go, he knew not where.

And Jack, as he pressed his hand over the pocket where he had again secreted that mysterious missive, only hoped that it would bring joy and happiness into the home of the Spences. How pleasant it would seem to be the bearer of good news.

He said nothing more, though having discovered this much he could easily guess that

the errand of the marshal must have some connection with the breaking of the last tie that would hold the Spence family to the old home up the Sound. Perhaps the marshal and the lawyer were on their way to inform the owner that foreclosure proceedings had been instituted, and to get his signature to documents that were necessary to the proper carrying out of the sad business.

Pete, having stowed away an incredible amount of stuff, so that he could hardly draw a full breath, began to manifest more or less interest in their progress. He suggested little changes in the course they were taking, and presently broke out with:

"Thar, if so be yuh jest look yondah, suh, p'raps ye kin see a boat tied up tuh a stake. Thet's whar old Van Arsdale lives now, a fishin' shack on a patch o' ground he happens tuh own. But I done heard as how them slick gals o' his'n gone an' made even sech a tough place look kinder homelike. An' see, thar's the ole man right now, alookin' toward us, wonderin' who we be."

Jack could easily see all that the other described. It was a lonely place for a man to bring his three sweet daughters; but doubtless necessity compelled such a thing.

The man with the white mustache and

goatee, who looked like a real Kentucky colonel, Jack thought, walked down to the rude little dock to meet them. Of course, he recognized the marshal, who must have been an old acquaintance of his; and had little difficulty in guessing the errand that was probably bringing him there.

Then three young girls came running down to gather about the old man, as if suspecting the coming of new trouble they wished to be near to help him bear his cross.

Jack found himself quivering with eagerness. And again did he hope that the message from the absent son and brother might soften the blow that seemed about to fall upon this devoted little family.

They reached the landing and hastened to get ashore; all but Pete, who had developed a second-stage appetite, and started in eating again, regardless of all other matters.

The old planter stood there like a lion at bay, with his three daughters clinging to him. It was a pretty picture, that would often come up in the memory of the boys when far away from the scene itself.

He seemed to be paying particular attention to the marshal, who stepped forward and gravely shook hands with him.

"I had your letter, Mr. Burrows, and looked

to see you some time today," was the way Mr. Spence opened the conversation.

"And as I wrote you, Spence," the marshal replied, "I'm only here in my official capacity to carry out the execution of the law's demands. As your friend, suh, I deeply sympathize with you in your troubles, but being sworn to do my duty, however painful it may be, there was no choice left to me."

"I understand all that, Burrows. This is only a mere matter of routine, anyway. The blow fell months ago, when I had to leave my old home. I thought I might save it in some way by keeping myself secreted, in the hope that several friends in another part of the country would come to my assistance. But that hope no longer exists, sir, and I am now ready to do whatever is required."

"There is no hurry, Spence," the marshal went on, curiosity concerning the mission of the motor boat boys getting the better of him, "and as these gentlemen happened to rescue us from a very serious position, since our boat was wrecked, and they were even then on the way to visit you, perhaps you would like to talk with them, suh."

It seemed as though Mr. Spence noticed the presence of the boys for the first time then. He looked at them with a puzzled brow, as though

unable to guess what such a party of pleasure seekers could want with a broken-hearted Southern planter.

So Jack at once stepped forward, while his mates gathered in a clump, eagerly observing every little thing that transpired.

"While we were coming down the Delaware River, sir, starting on our long coast cruise, we happened to come in contact with a young aviator, who had alighted on the water close by us in a new hydro-aeroplane. When he mentioned his name we recognized it as belonging to a daring aviator who had suddenly jumped into national fame as one of the most skillful of his class. He heard of our plans, and that in all probability we would pass close to Beaufort. And he asked us to bear a packet to a Mr. Van Arsdale Spence, whose present place of residence he did not seem to know, but believed we would be able to learn it after we arrived here. So I am pleased, sir, to hand you the sealed message that was given to us by your son, now famous in the world of aviation, Mr. Malcolm Spence!"

The old planter started, and turned pale as his trembling hand was outstretched to take the packet. Indeed, he was utterly unable to open it, so that one of his daughters proceeded to do this for him.

Jack held his breath. Oh! how he did hope that it would be good news, for if ever any one had need of cheering intelligence this old, broken-down man did.

He saw him adjust his glasses and commence to read. Already had the three girls gleaned all that was contained in that missive, and from their happy faces Jack understood that it was all right.

If he had any doubt he had only to look at the face of the planter. First it was eager, then yearning, and finally he turned to the marshal with possibly the first laugh that had burst from his lips these many moons.

"Aha! you're having your journey for your pains, Burrows!" he cried. "The old place isn't going to leave the Spence family after all. Look! this is from my boy, and directs me to go to the bank in Beaufort, to which he has transmitted funds to make the first payment that will save our home! More will follow as soon as he hears from us. Money is flowing in on him, money and honors as thick as they can come. And his heart has gone out to the father and sisters he left years ago. It's all right, Burrows, thanks to these kind boys who have borne his message to me."

He went around, shaking the hand of every one with vehemence. And no one looked hap-

pier than the marshal, upon learning that stern duty after all would not compel him to take from his old friend the home of his ancestors.

"But it was a close shave, let me say," was his remark later on to Jack, as they all started to gather under the humble roof of the fisherman's shack which the devotion of those three brave daughters had almost beautified, so that the old man might not be too much broken down; "another day would have been too late."

"Then I'm glad that storms and breakdowns did not keep us from getting here on time," said the commodore of the Motor Boat Club.

CHAPTER XX.

MEETING TROUBLE HALF WAY.

Jack had been studying his coast survey charts seriously of late.

He knew that there were a few hardships before them ere they could anchor in front of Florida's metropolis on the St. John's River, fair Jacksonville.

And as it was only right that every member of the club should share in the discussion as to their course, he gave them to understand that there would be held a caucus on the very next night.

At the lower end of Bogue Sound amid the sedge grass they hoped to make their next camp, when this question would be debated from every side, and the plan of campaign adopted as majority decided.

When they were getting ready to leave the Spence family, Jack felt some one pulling at his sleeve, and looking around discovered that it was old Pete.

"How 'bout that ere dollar, boss?" asked the cracker.

"That's a fact, I came near forgetting you, Pete," laughed Jack. "And to prove that it

wasn't intentional, here's double pay for you. I guess we've had enough pleasure out of this to count for two dollars."

"That's mighty nice of you-all," declared the fellow, actually showing something like gratitude in his manner, as he held out a hand for Jack to shake. "An' mout I be so bold as tuh 'mind yuh thet I don't hanker 'bout stayin' down heah any longer than I has tuh. Yuh promised tuh see I gut back tuh Beaufort, suh," he said.

"He's got you there, Jack, for that's just what you did," laughed Herb.

"I reckon that money'll burn a hole in Pete's pocket, unless he manages to get to town right smart," declared the marshal; "but Mr. Spence heah has got an old sail boat in which the hull lot of us is goin' to head foh Beaufort soon. Pete is welcome to go along, if he cares."

"That pleases us a whole lot," remarked George, "because, you see, we had a nasty little experience with some toughs along the water front, and they bombarded us with a shower of stones as we pulled out, though fortunately none of them struck either the boats or ourselves."

"Yes, and as we've got a long trip ahead of us before we reach the place we marked for

the end of the motor boat cruise, the sooner we make a start the better. So we'll say good-bye to you all; and Mr. Spence, best wishes for your future happiness. Perhaps some day we may run across that famous son of yours again, because he took our home address and said he meant to get in touch with us. We'd all like to meet him again, eh, boys?" and Jack turned to his chums as he asked this.

"That's what!" declared Nick, who had been especially interested in the wonderful hydro-aeroplane, and even hinted that some day he also hoped to fly through the upper currents in one, much to the amusement of his comrades, who roared every time any one tried to picture the fat boy trying such stunts.

So they shook hands all around, not forgetting the three charming girls, who seemed very friendly disposed toward the Yankee boys, after discovering what fine news the voyagers had brought their father.

"All aboard!" cried the commodore.

As the three motor boats put out upon the sun-kissed water the girls waved dainty handkerchiefs as long as they could see the fleet. Then a change of course shut out the fishing shack, where love had made a home for the planter in his hour of adversity.

"After all, that was a most satisfying ad-

venture, fellows," Jack remarked, for the other boats were close by at the time.

"I should say, yes," admitted Josh.

"Only thing I didn't like," declared Nick, who was looking quite unhappy, they began to notice, as though a spell of sea sickness had gripped him, "was that we had to break away just when we were getting to know 'em."

At that frank admission the rest broke into roars of laughter.

"So that's the way the tide sets, is it?" remarked Jack.

"Why, sure," cried Josh, "didn't you see how smitten Nick was with that little brunette with the snapping big black eyes? She was pretty, all right, and ten to one he's got her address, because I saw him writing something down in his note book, sure as you live."

But Nick faced them, rosy red but defiant.

"Don't care if I did," he said, with a decided shake of his head. "It's just rank jealousy on Josh's part that makes him say that; because Betty wouldn't notice him even a little bit. Now, let's talk of something else. I don't care to bring the lady's name into the discussion."

"Good for you, Nick!" said Herb.

"And he's quite right, too, boys," asserted

Jack, positively, and immediately switched the talk to another subject.

They made decent progress during the hours that they kept on. In Beaufort they had managed to renew their supply of gasolene, so that they now had sufficient of the fuel to see them through for some time. Once they reached Charleston it would be necessary to lay in another lot.

But there was a hard proposition before them ere they could hope to gain the beautiful city by the sea. Boats drawing the water theirs did could not hope to get through some of the small creeks uniting the broad stretches of water lying parallel with the coast. Hence it would be necessary for them to make another outside passage, possibly several.

But Jack had it all planned, and wished to get the opinions of his chums before the course was definitely decided on.

Camp was made in the sedge grass on Bogue Sound, just as they had figured on, and after supper had been disposed of, a council of war called. At this the charts were closely scanned, especially the pencil marks which Jack had made. He also explained minutely just what he conceived to be the best method of procedure.

"Now, if we were making this cruise in

canoes instead of heavy power boats," he remarked, laying his pencil on a particular section of the chart, "our best plan would be to have the craft carried by ox wagon across a little stretch of low rice country here, to the Waccamaw River, which has a very swift current; and down that we could run some seventy miles, bringing us far on our way. But as we'd never be able to find a way to take our boats across country, we must go outside again."

There being no other way, the boys presently unanimously agreed to face the music. Besides, their previous success at riding the heaving billows of the ocean began to give them confidence.

"If we go around Florida, and bring up in the Gulf, we're likely to do a lot of this outside business," remarked George, as bravely as though he never knew what fear meant.

"Yes," put in Nick, also valiant when settled on solid ground, "and I suppose we've just got to get used to the thing. Who's afraid, anyhow? Settle it just as you think best, Jack. We rely on your judgment every time. That's why we elected you to be commodore of the fleet."

"Hear! hear!" murmured Josh, pretending to applaud the noble sentiment feebly with his finger-tips.

Once the plan of campaign was settled, they all felt better. For some time they had known that this problem must come up for solution sooner or later, and truth to tell, it had been rather a load on their minds. There is a positive relief in knowing the worst. Means for meeting the difficulty can then be discussed; and as a rule most obstacles lose much of their terror when held up to the light.

The little insect pests came around in such numbers that it was quickly decided a night ashore would not be comfortable. Nick was the only one who rebelled.

"Why, I'd put up with ten million skeeters before I'd voluntarily choose to try and compose myself to sleep in that narrow rocking coffin," he declared.

"Now, I like that," complained George, always up in arms when his beloved craft was spoken of in an uncomplimentary manner. "Look a gift horse in the mouth, if you like; but the sleeping accommodations aboard are good enough for *me*. And to show you that I don't bear any malice, Nick, I'm going to help you fix up a berth on shore here."

Nick might have backed out, only he dared not after that, and sly George, who really delighted in the prospect of having plenty of

room to turn over in, knew it, which was the main reason for his offer of assistance.

So when the time came for retiring Nick was left ashore with a little tent constructed of cheese cloth, which was believed to be so closely woven that even the smallest insect pest could not pass through.

Nick had tried his best to coax Josh to share his accommodations; but the lanky one was content with his comfortable quarters aboard. Even Jimmy shook his head when the fat boy showed him how splendid it would be to lie there, and get all the night air that was stirring.

"Excuse me, Nick," Jimmy had said, "sure, I'd like to accommodate ye, but it seems to me there's a quare smell in the air that makes me think of bears. P'raps they do come down here out of the canebrake beyant. And I'd feel safer aboard the boat."

"Now, you think you're going to scare me, don't you?" demanded the stout boy, pugnaciously, his stubborn nature having been aroused, "but all the same you ain't. I c'n see through a knothole in a fence. The rest of you are afraid, that's what! All right, it's good there's one brave feller in the bunch. But, George, you've just got to loan me your gun again."

"More razorback pork for dinner tomorrow, fellows," laughed George.

"Oh! well, if you try to throw every obstacle in my way, why of course——" began Nick, eagerly seizing upon the slightest excuse to hedge; when George, fearful that he might have to share the cramped quarters aboard the *Wireless* after all with his team mate, quickly exclaimed:

"You can have the gun, and welcome, Nick; only be careful how you shoot. One of those charges at close range would go through the flimsy planking of my boat like a bullet. Here, take the gun. And if there's anything else I can do to make you comfortable, let me know. I'm the most obliging fellow you ever met."

Nick looked at him out of the corner of his eye, as though he strongly suspected the genuine character of this generosity. Still, he felt that he could not in decency draw back now, so he took the shotgun and tucked it away beside his blanket.

Considerably to the satisfaction of the entire club, the night passed without any wild alarm. If there were bears in the neighborhood, as Jimmy had wickedly suggested, they at least had the decency to keep aloof from the camp. Perhaps they showed their wisdom in so doing when Nick was on guard. That, at least, was

what he boasted, when Jack and the rest came ashore and aroused him from a sound sleep.

The fact of the matter was that Nick had never once awakened during the entire night. A dozen bears might have prowled around the camp, sniffing at anything left lying around loose, and in all probability he would never have been any the wiser, provided they did not tumble his tent down about his ears.

Once more they started on their way. Jack continually consulted his charts. When connecting creeks had to be negotiated, in order to reach some channel beyond, it was absolutely necessary that the tide be taken at its flood, otherwise they were very apt to find themselves stuck in the mud.

Three full days did they keep this up, and then, having managed to surmount every difficulty, they reached the point where that outside run became a necessity, ere they could enter the Peedee River at Winyah Bay, and once more take up the inside route.

Another day was spent waiting for the conditions to become more favorable. Time was not any great factor in their cruise, but safety did enter very much into their calculations. They had passed through another stormy period and were quite satisfied to snuggle down to camp, to rest up after their arduous work

of the last few days, wriggling their way through those tortuous creeks, and working the setting pole at times for hours, when the saving of the precious gasolene became an object.

"How's this for the right morning?" asked George, who was anxious to have the long and hazardous outside run over with.

"Looks good to me, so far," said Jack, "and I guess we'll get off right after we've had breakfast. We might wait longer and fare worse, you know, George."

"Oh! I'm ready for the run. It can't come any too soon to suit me," declared the skipper of the *Wireless,* "and I honestly believe I've got my engine in better shape than ever before."

"Thank goodness for that!" said Nick, who did not look any too happy.

And at seven o'clock, while the sun was hanging low in the east, they started off, with the longest outside run of the cruise confronting them; and all sorts of possibilities for trouble looming up on the horizon.

CHAPTER XXI.

FOG BOUND WHILE AT SEA.

"How much further do we have to go, Jack?"

It was Herb calling out after this style. The three boats were close together, and steadily making progress over the heaving surface of the ocean. Off to the right lay the shore, plainly seen, though they did not dare approach too close, lest they get into that sickening ground swell, that rolled the narrow *Wireless* in a way to make those aboard dizzy.

"As near as I can judge we ought to see the mouth of Winyah Bay inside of the next half hour. It's different from an inlet, you understand, and wide enough to fool us, unless we take great care," replied the commodore, who had his marine glasses leveled at the shore about half the time, trying to pick up landmarks calculated to tell him where they were.

"Wow! that *would* be a tough proposition, now!" shouted Josh. "What if we did go past, why we'd just have to keep right along this way till we made Charleston."

"Don't you think of trying it," called Nick, from the *Wireless*, which was being held in

leash by the now cautious skipper. "Why, this racking fever of anxiety would just kill us if it had to keep up much longer, and that's right, fellows, even if George here won't acknowledge the corn."

"Oh! shucks! it isn't half as bad as you make out, Nick. The trouble is, you're so plagued logy you can't keep the balance of the boat. These thoroughbreds are delicately constructed, you see, and have to be treated different from other boats."

"I should just guess, yes," complained poor Nick, in a dolorous tone. "A feller has to be thinking of the blessed old boat all the while, and forget his own aches and pains. Why, every muscle in my whole body is sore from the strain."

"I say, Jack, would ye moind turnin' the glass back yander and tellin' us what sort of thing that cloud is that hugs the wather so close? I've been watching the same some time now, and I do think it's comin' this way," Jimmy remarked, loud enough for the others to hear, so that immediately every eye was quickly turned in the quarter toward which the Irish lad had pointed.

Jack immediately felt a sudden thrill of alarm pass over him, even before he had focussed the glasses upon Jimmy's so-called

"cloud." He suspected what it might prove to be, and the very thought of being caught out on the ocean by a fog gave him a decidedly unpleasant sensation.

"Say, that ain't a cloud, I bet you," declared Nick.

"Looks more like fog to me," Josh called out, "and as sure as you live, boys, it's creeping down this way and widening out like fun. Hey! Jack, ain't that fog?"

"It sure is," replied the one who held the glasses, as he lowered them and cast an anxious look in the direction of the shore, as though he would take a last survey before the land became blotted out.

This was one of the things Jack had feared. A sudden storm of course would have brought alarm in its train; but this silent yet gripping fog might be just as potent a force toward their undoing. Once it enveloped them, they were apt to grope along for hours, possibly working more and more out to see. And when a wind dissipated the fog, perhaps they could not see land!

Jack immediately determined to risk minor dangers by turning in more toward the shore. If he could only listen for the beating of the rollers on the beach, it would be possible to tell

when they came to the open bay by the sudden cessation of this sound.

"What are you changing the course for?" demanded George, suspiciously, a minute later, though he followed suit readily enough, determined not to get far away from the other more stable boats.

"We'd better get in nearer shore, so we can hear the sound of the surf," Jack replied.

"Oh! I see, you hope to keep tabs on our course by ear, when the eye fails us; is that it, Jack?" asked Herb.

"That's one reason," Jack called back. "Perhaps we may be able to tell when we're opposite the mouth of the bay, if we listen carefully. But in another five minutes that fog will be down on us, boys, by the way it creeps on, faster than we are going."

"How about signals?" asked George.

"Every boat has a horn of some sort, and you remember what the different blasts mean. The *Tramp* is a single toot, the *Comfort* two in quick succession, while your *Wireless* is denoted by three sharp ones, George. Four will mean that we must turn a little more to starboard, and five, draw closer together for a confab. Got all that, now?"

"All right here, Jack," assented Herb.

"And ditto with us," declared George.

"Well, be watchful and ready for anything, for here comes the wet blanket to cover us," observed Jack.

It was a nasty fog, as thick as pea soup, as George called out a little later. First the outlines of the shore were blotted out as though by an impenetrable curtain. Then even the boats, close as they were, began to go, until it was no longer possible to distinguish them from the sea of gray vapor around.

Naturally the boys felt exceedingly nervous every minute of the time. Jack had reduced speed, for he did not wish to run past the mouth of Winyah Bay, if such a thing could be prevented by due caution.

An hour crept along. It seemed like three times that length of time to every one of the listening lads. All this while they had managed to catch that low throbbing sound from the shore. Sometimes it would be very faint, and require careful work in order to locate it; then again the beat of the waves on the sandy strand came quite distinctly.

Somehow, as long as they could catch this reassuring sound, they seemed to feel renewed confidence. And yet the strain was terrible. The day was passing, and if night came on, to find them still groping their way in this un-

certain manner down the South Carolina coast, the prospect would seem gloomy indeed.

No one seemed to care to eat much. Even Nick, for the time being, had gone back on that wonderful appetite of his, and actually turned up his nose when George got out the bag that contained hard tack and cheese, asking the fat boy if he cared to have a "snack" to fortify him against what might yet be in store for them.

"Excuse me," said Nick, loftily. "There are times to eat, but according to my way of thinking this ain't one of 'em. When a feller has to do a lot of high thinking he'd be wise to keep his mind clear and let grub alone."

Truth to tell, Nick was feeling rather squeamish. The swell rolled the narrow boat more than had been the case when they kept further out; and besides, such were his fears that they affected his nerves, and also his stomach.

"All right," said George, who did not happen to be in the same condition, "I'm not a big feeder, but it's always wise to keep up your strength. And talking about letting grub alone, when you once get ashore again the way you'll pitch in must make our supplies look sad. I know you, Nick; you can't fool me."

Nick disdained to make any reply. He even

turned his back on the skipper when George started to munch biscuit and cheese.

"What time is it?" asked George, after a while, upon seeing the fat boy look at his little nickel watch, for the tenth time at least.

"Just three o'clock!" groaned Nick, sadly replacing his timepiece and looking longingly toward the west, where he knew solid ground lay, if only they could ever set feet upon it once more.

"And we started out on the sea by eight," remarked George. "Say, that's something worth while; and when we get to talking it over we'll have reason to be proud of the way these bully little boats have served us. Eight hours on the ocean; just think of that, will you?"

The others were close enough to hear what was said, for it was quite still, as the motors were running at a reduced speed.

"Perhaps it may be eighty before we're done!" called Josh, on the right.

"I do believe we're going to bring up on the coast of Ould Ireland before we're through with this job!" Jimmy was saying, from some unseen place on the port side of the *Wireless,* which happened to be occupying the middle berth at the time.

At that the rest broke out into a laugh,

though truth to tell there was not any too much mirth about the same.

"Say, I haven't heard anything for nearly five minutes now, Jack!" called Herb, who, it seemed, was paying strict attention to business, and not bothering about whether he got anything to eat or not, or what would happen in case they headed out into the vast expanse of salt water that stretched across to Africa.

"Same here, Herb," echoed Jack.

"Do you think we've been heading out too far, and is that the reason, Jack?"

"I've got my compass right before me and, if anything, we've been edging in just a little bit more than at any other time," came Jack's answer.

"Then what?" asked the *Comfort's* skipper, eagerly.

"Perhaps the bay has opened up, and the shore line is miles away from us!" was the cheering way Jack put it.

"Good for you, commodore!" called Josh.

"Oh! I hope that's so!" wailed Nick.

"But how are we going to find out?" queried Herb.

"By changing our course directly into the west, and taking the bull by the horns," Jack replied, boldly. "We can creep along, you know, and if we've made a mistake, why, it's

easy to turn around and bear away again. But somehow, I've got a pretty strong notion things are going to work out all right for us, fellows."

"Hurrah! that's the kind of talk!" cried Nick, beginning to perk up a little, and wonder if after all George might not be right when he said that they owed it to themselves as a duty to eat, whether hungry or not, in order to conserve their strength for any emergency.

"Are you turning now, Jack?" asked George.

"Yes; keep close by and try to pattern after what I do. Here goes, then, fellows."

"Hit her up; who cares for expenses?" cried Josh, who had been taking it comfortably right along, and seemed almost free from care.

By exercising more or less caution, they managed to change their course without losing each other in the fog. This was accomplished by calling out from time to time, or even sounding the signals on the horns.

In this fashion then they began to creep along. Only for that compass which Jack had before him, they might as well have been heading out to sea, for all any one could say.

"Me to get a compass as soon as we strike Charleston!" declared Herb.

"Yes, and George must do the same," Jack declared, from somewhere in the opaque mist. "Supposing we were separated in some way; you two fellows would be badly off with no means for locating east from west, or north from south."

"Jack, darlint!" they heard Jimmy cry out just then.

"What is it?" asked the skipper of the *Tramp*.

"I do be thinkin' I saw a break in the beastly ould fog beyont us; yis, an' by the powers, it's a braze that fans me cheek at this identical minute!"

"He's right, fellows!" shouted George.

"Then that means good-bye to the nasty old fog, which will be a riddance of bad rubbish!" called the overjoyed Nick, reaching out and possessing himself of the cracker bag, so as to be ready to do his duty by his system.

"The breeze is dead ahead, boys," said Jack. "And in that event the fog will be swept to sea. Watch now, and you'll see something worth while."

Jack evidently knew what he was talking about, for in less than five minutes it seemed as though some wizard must have waved his

magical wand, for suddenly they shot out of the thick pea-soup atmosphere and into the bright sunshine.

They were indeed in a big bay, with land on three sides. The sun, now half way and more down the western sky, shone in an unclouded field, and the water danced in the fresh shore breeze.

Then every fellow shouted and waved his hat, such was the relief that passed over them at the successful termination of the long outside dash.

"Don't any one of you ever dare to run my bully engine down, after it has stood by me so nobly," George was saying, as they started at a faster clip up still further into Winyah Bay, into which the Peedee River empties.

No one was disposed to cast the slightest reflection on the cranky motor of the speed boat; for just then they were feeling at peace with all the world, and quite ready to forgive their worst enemies.

That night they camped on the shore of a creek that emptied into the bay, ready to take up their southern journey with the coming of the morrow.

CHAPTER XXII.

SAVANNAH AT LAST.

After that came some more hard inside work. There were times when even the sanguine Jack began to fear that they would never reach Charleston; for even at high tide they found the connecting creeks in many instances little more than shallow ponds, and before they could break through, considerable pushing and dragging had to be done.

But where there is a will there usually appears to be a way; and by slow degrees they drew nearer the city on the coast.

"With good luck, fellows, we ought to make it tomorrow," Jack announced, one evening, after he had been closely examining his charts again by the light of the cheery camp fire.

"Do you really mean it, Jack, darlint?" demanded Jimmy, with the air of one who had almost given up hope.

"I sure do," replied the other. "As I make it out, this is Bull's Island we are on right now. If that's a fact, there's a fine inside passage all the way to Charleston Bay, behind several other islands, or at least one big one

called Capers. Our troubles are over, so far as this part of the trip goes."

"That's bully good news you're giving us, Jack," remarked George; "and I hope it won't prove a delusion and a snare. I've had about as much of that push pole business as is good for my constitution, I guess."

"Yes, and look at me!" cried Nick, pulling a long face, though with only a great effort; "pretty near skin and bones, with all this worry and hard work; and to add insult to injury, put on half rations latterly. It's a shame, that's what."

"Rats!" scoffed the unbelieving George; "I'd like to wager now that you've gone and picked up ten pounds since starting on this cruise. By the way you put away the grub it ought to be nearer twenty."

"You don't mean to hurt my feelings, I know, George," said the fat boy, sweetly; "and, considering the source, I'll forgive you. But I warn you plainly, right now, that if I have to keep on being crew to your blooming old speed boat, I'm going to lay in a lot of rubber cushions at Charleston, so as to keep me from rubbing all the skin off my poor body when I have to sleep aboard here, and the boat wabbles with every teenty wave. Don't you say a word, for my mind's made up."

"Oh! get whatever you want in that line; it doesn't make a bit of difference to me. I never have needed cushions so far," George exploded, sarcastically.

"Huh! that's easy; because you've got *me* to bang up against!" exclaimed Nick.

"That's right, George; he's got one on you there," laughed Jack.

"And who'd want a finer cushion than our Nick?" remarked Herb.

"Nature knew what was needed, when he was padded and filled out so well," Josh managed to work in with; "and if ever I needed a bumper, I'd pick him out first thing."

"Get out!" snapped Nick; but all the same he grinned as though complimented.

On the following morning, then, they made an early start, for there was considerable of a distance to be covered ere they could reach the hospitable docks of Charleston by the sea.

Jack knew that their supply of gas was growing alarmingly low. Indeed, George had already been obliged to borrow from the *Comfort,* as that craft had the largest reservoir and could spare a little.

"It's going to be a close shave to get us there," he remarked, as they started.

"What if my tank goes empty again?" demanded George.

"I've been thinking of that," said Jack. "As a last resort then, we'll make camp, empty all we've got into one tank, and that boat can go after a new supply."

"That's the ticket!" cried Josh.

"It takes Jack to solve these maddening puzzles!" declared Nick, with a look of affection in the direction of the chum who never failed them.

"But still, I have hopes we'll all pull through," Jack continued, encouragingly.

"How'd it be for one of the boats to do the towing act?" suggested Herb.

"And that would mean the *Comfort,* because she's built more on the lines of a tow boat than either of the others," remarked George. "I enter a kick against anything of the kind. It's bad enough to be humiliated that way when a fellow's motor goes back on him; but in calm weather, and with the engine in the pink of condition, it just can't be thought of for a minute."

"Hey! what you trying to do again; throw me overboard?" demanded Nick, aggressively, as he floundered about when the *Wireless* came to a sudden and totally unexpected stop, just as George ceased speaking.

"His engine broke down again, that's what!" jeered Josh.

"Is that a fact, George?" asked Jack, provoked at the idea of delay.

"Oh! not quite so bad as that," replied George, peevishly; "I think I know what happened. I forgot something, that's all. Perhaps I can have it fixed in three shakes of a lamb's tail. You go on, and I'll catch up easy enough."

"Don't you dare to do it, fellows!" cried Nick. "That might mean for us to be marooned here a whole day, yes, mebbe a week. And most of the grub is aboard that old *Comfort*, you see."

"We'll wait a while and see how it comes out," remarked Jack. "Do you need any help, George?"

"Who, me? Not in the least. I tell you, I know what's ailing, and I'll get it to going all right in five minutes," George answered, stiffly, for the many freaks of his engine gave him unhappy spells; as Josh once declared, it was like a certain girl he knew, in that "when it was good, it was very, very good; and when it was bad, it was hor-rid!"

However, for once George proved to be a truthful prophet. By the time those five minutes were up, he had succeeded in coaxing the refractory motor to behave itself; and suddenly the *Wireless* shot off amid a rattling

volley of explosions that told full well how her muffler was cut out.

George continued on at a pace that took him far ahead of the rest. Then they saw him draw up and wait, as though, having demonstrated the ability of his motor to do good work, caution again dictated that he keep in touch with the supply boat and the pilot craft.

That day was the easiest of the week. They had an open passage nearly all the way to the bay, the weather was all that could be asked; and the rest did seem so fine after so much hard labor with push poles.

"If this sort of thing would only keep up," Nick remarked, as they landed on a sandspit to make a fire and have a pot of hot coffee at noon, in order to cheer things up, "I'd have some hope of getting back to my former condition again."

"Well, if that means taking up any more room aboard my boat," grunted George, "I hope you won't do it. Things are getting to a pass now that I'm feeling squeezed half the time. Some day we hope you're going to have that ferryboat made to order, as you've been threatening. Say, it'll just be a jim dandy, I guess."

"It's going to combine speed with comfort," declared Nick, unblushingly. "While it'll

beat Herb's tub all hollow for room, at the same time it can make rings around the poor old *Wireless*. Just you wait; I've got her all mapped out in my head, and some day I'll surprise the bunch."

The afternoon run took them in good time to where the sound they were following broke into Charleston Bay.

"There's the ruins of old Fort Sumter!" cried Nick, as they saw the lovely panorama spread out in front of them.

"And Fort Moultrie, too! Gee! to think that we'd ever get to set eyes on the places we used to read so much about in history," said Josh, staring around.

"Well," laughed Jack, "to my mind right now, the best of it is that yonder lies Charleston, where we can lay in a new supply of gas; because I'm expecting to find any minute that my well has gone dry. It's an awful thing to have a thirsty engine and nothing to feed it. But perhaps I'll pull through by making every drop tell."

It proved to be better than that, for there was not the slightest trouble experienced in making the run up the bay to the city.

Skirting the shore, Jack kept his eyes on the alert for some shipyard, knowing that

such a place would better accommodate the three power boats than any other harbor.

It happened that Jimmy's sharp eyes caught the first sign of a boat builder's establishment, and presently the three little craft that had come through such a checkered experience with credit, were secured to landings within the enclosed space of the shipyard.

Here it was determined to remain for a couple of days, as there were a number of things to be done besides replenishing their stock of fuel and food.

All of the boys wanted to see the city, about which, with its beauties, they had heard considerable.

"From here on to Jacksonville we ought to have it fairly easy," Jack explained to the rest. "There's an inside route taken by steamers to Savannah, and from that Georgia city clear to Fernandina in Florida. Then we will have to go out for just a little run; after which we enter the broad mouth of the St. Johns."

"And we'll really be in Florida then, will we?" asked Nick. "My goodness; sometimes, when we were sticking in those mud creeks, it seemed to me that Florida must be just six thousand miles away. And we're going to make it after all? Well, that's what comes of

push and grit. You fellers would have laid down long ago, only for my keeping everlastingly at it. But you're improving, I admit that; and I've got hopes that in time you'll do me credit."

Of course they were quite used to Nick's method of joshing, and took all this in good part. Had it been any one else he might have been suspected of egotism; but they all knew Nick, and what an effort it was to get him to do anything requiring an effort; so that the joke was not lost.

"When you take to prodding us to do things, water is going to run up-hill," was George's way of heading him off.

"Well, fellows, there have been a few things Nick knows how to do better than the rest of the bunch, you must admit that," Jack remarked, dryly.

" 'Course we do," grinned Josh. "F'r instance, he can beat any bullfrog I ever set eyes on, makin' a jump from a boat into the water."

"And sure, he can give the rist of us points on how to balance a boat by partin' his hair exactly in the meddle," Jimmy spoke up.

"And there ain't a living soul in the same class with Nick when it comes to stowing away grub. I've often sat and admired him at it, until I just groaned in despair of ever being

able to copy after him. I ain't built the right way, boys, you see. My pockets won't stretch far enough."

"Oh! keep it going, if it pleases you, boys," the good natured Nick observed; "it don't hurt me any more'n water falling on a duck's back. Josh as much as admits that he's just consumed by envy because he can't enjoy his food like I do. But I'm used to being knocked around like a football. George here has rolled all over me forty times, I guess, since we've been shipmates. I'm beginning to get calloused around my elbows and knees. By the time this cruise is finished I'll be ready to hire out in a side show as the only and original human punching bag."

The stay in Charleston was covered in two days, during which they managed to get around pretty well, and see all that was worth while. Besides, they had laid in all necessary stores, and the gas supply was looked after.

On the third morning the Motor Boat Club set out along the wide Stone River, which soon narrowed, as all these southern rivers have a habit of doing, a short distance from its mouth. Then, by degrees, they passed through a tortuous channel, that, being safely navigated, took them in turn to another river, called the Wadmelaw.

Passing the lower stretches of the swift running Edisto River, they managed to make the northern shore of St. Helena Sound by the middle of the afternoon; and an hour later determined to camp there in the open, rather than enter the tortuous watercourses leading to Beaufort.

An early start on the following day gave them a chance to pass Beaufort before ten o'clock, and then head for distant Savannah.

The course was intricate; but Jack studied his chart closely; and besides, they discovered that the channel was located by means of targets which doubtless had been placed there by the steamboat company, so that with any exercise of care they had little excuse for going astray.

And as the last of Calibogue Sound was left behind they managed to reach the wide Savannah River, just as the sun was sinking in the west.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THANKS TO THE PILOT—CONCLUSION.

When the adventurous six left Savannah in their wake, and struck in for the stream below the city which would take them to Wassaw Sound, they knew that they had really started on what was destined to be the last leg of the trip to Florida.

By noon they had managed to make Ossaban Sound, and still kept on, hoping to cross the wide reach that formed St. Catherine's Sound that same day. But it was not to be. The sky clouded up, the wind whipped into the northwest, and in a short time the boys realized that it was getting very chilly for this far south, in the middle of October.

When they saw the wild aspect that wide stretch of tumbling water presented, it was quickly settled that the crossing must be put off until another day. Accordingly camp was made in a hamak, where the force of the wind was broken. And here they proceeded to take things as comfortably as possible.

George took his gun and went out to see if he could scare up any sort of game; for there had been murmurings of late to the effect that

they did not seem to be getting their full share of such things on this trip.

The fact of the matter was, that so much of their precious time was spent in trying to overcome the numerous difficulties by which they found themselves confronted, that there were scant opportunities for fishing and hunting.

Nick persisted in getting a line out, as he had been seized with a great desire to partake of fresh fish for supper, and no one else showed any signs of intending to make a try.

Twenty minutes later those in camp were aroused by hearing a tremendous splash, accompanied by half muffled shouts.

"Help! come quickly, or he'll get away! Hurry! hurry, boys!"

Everybody ran like the wind to the spot where Nick had been seen calmly seated on a log that projected over the water, offering him a fine seat, from which to carry on his fishing operations.

What they discovered was the stout boy floundering in the water of the sound, being drawn this way and that by some unseen agency that was fastened to the other end of his line.

Nick's obstinate disposition was made manifest by the frantic way he clung to that same

fishing line. No danger seemed sufficient to cause him to let it go. Perhaps, though, he had been unwise enough to wrap the cord around his chubby wrist, and could not have let loose, even had he so desired.

Josh doubled up, and fairly howled, the sight was so very comical to him; which made the fisherman all the more angry.

"What ails that silly goose?" he spluttered, as well as he was able, considering that half the time his mouth was filled with salty water. "He only thinks of the funny part of it. Don't care a cent whether a human life is sacrificed on the altar of friendship; or a jolly big fish breaks the line and gets away. Jack, somebody come on in, and help me land him, won't you?"

Jack was already throwing his coat off, and in another minute he had leaped from the bank into the water. Just as Nick had said, there was some danger that he might be dragged out beyond his depth; and at least the great struggling fish was liable to break away, and become lost to them.

Once Jack got hold of the line, and it was all over. By degrees they drew the captive to the shore, upon which he was finally cast, proving to be an enormous red drum, or as they are called in the South, a channel bass,

weighing pretty nearly forty pounds, Jack figured.

"Is it good to eat?" was the first natural question fired at him by Nick, whose eyes were fairly glistening with pride as they watched the dying flops of the bronze-backed quarry.

"First rate, if a bit dry," Jack replied. "The meat is snow white, and something like halibut, only not quite so fine. But it's a great day for you, Nick. I can see one time when you're sure to get your fill."

Indeed, it proved to be a good day all around, for just then they heard George letting fly with both barrels, and following it with a glad whoop.

"He's gone and got something," declared Josh. "Ain't it queer how things run? With us it's feast or a famine all the while. D'ye reckon it was a deer he knocked over, Jack?"

"More'n likely another shoat," said Nick, grinning; "but even if it is, razorback pork ain't half bad when a feller's real hungry."

Presently George came in. It was getting near dusk, and they could just see that he was carrying a load of some sort on his back, which he tried to hide until he could reach camp.

Josh began to grunt at a lively rate, by which he hinted that they anticipated another diet of pork.

"What did you run up against, George?" asked Jack.

"That!" exclaimed the proud Nimrod, as he swung his burden around.

"Great governor! it's a turkey, as sure as you live!" shouted Josh.

At that Nick could hold in no longer, but began to dance around in great glee, rubbing himself as though in anticipation of the feast to come, and making all sorts of suggestive motions, after the manner of a man feeding.

"How under the sun did you get close enough to knock the big bird down with a charge of quail shot?" asked Jack, pleased because George had held up his reputation as a sportsman.

"I don't just know," replied the other. "I was standing in the shade of a tree, and thinking that it was no use going further, when something lighted close by me, and I saw it was a wild turkey. Well, I just up and gave him both barrels, as fast as I could pull the triggers. Then he flopped over, I ran forward and nailed my prize. And he's pretty heavy to tote any distance, too, I tell you."

"That means another of those earth ovens tonight, don't it, Jack?" asked Nick.

"Nothing else would do the business," came the reply; "and so everybody get busy, piling

up the wood while I dig a hole," replied the one addressed.

The turkey was baked to a turn when they uncovered the oven in the morning, and, having their appetites along, even so early in the day, those six lads made that noble bird look like a rack of bones before they admitted that they were satisfied. Indeed, they had to fairly drag Nick away from the wreck, for he declared it to be the finest treat of his whole life.

But then, he often said that. What was present always seemed the best to Nick. Fading events held little interest for him, since the mill could never grind again with the water that was past.

In the morning the big sound looked smooth enough to tempt them upon its treacherous bosom. The crossing was made with ease; and later on came Sapelo with its particular troubles, the wind having risen meanwhile.

But the boats proved seaworthy, and the young Corinthians who manned them had learned many a valuable lesson from past experiences; so that by noon they had navigated this dangerous sheet of water and were well along their way.

"There's a lighthouse away over there, Jack," announced Josh, pointing ahead.

"Yes; that must be Doboy Light, and the

sound of the same name will be the next to take our attention, boys," Jack replied, composedly, as though he had the entire map of the coast region impressed on his mind by now.

"Is there any end to 'em?" asked Nick, dolefully.

"Two more before we reach Fernandina, St. Simon's and big Cumberland. And after we've rested at Fernandina we'll go through a few more passages, and then take a little outside run of a few miles, when we can enter the St. Johns."

"Oh! happy day!" chanted Josh, pretending to strum a banjo as he sang.

"Then, if all goes well, we ought to bring up at Jacksonville inside of say two days at the most; is that so, Jack?" Herb inquired.

"Correct. And nothing is going to happen, make up your mind to that, fellows," Jack declared, resolutely. "We've allowed nothing to frighten us up to now, and yet used a due amount of caution, just as we promised those at home, when they gave us permission to take this jolly trip. And that's our slogan all the time, 'Speed, with care!' It's a winning combination, I tell you, boys."

They spent the night near Darien, in a creek that they happened to be passing through as a sort of short-cut.

Jack's confidence proved to be well placed, for on the following day they safely passed both St. Simon's and the big Cumberland Sound, bringing up close to Fernandina by nightfall.

Jack advised against trying to reach the city in the dusk. There was danger of running upon a snag, or happening to attract the attention of dissolute characters, who, taking advantage of the darkness of the night and the fact of the cruisers being strangers to the place, might attempt to rob them.

His plan was to stay where they were, a safe distance away, until morning, and then make their way across to the city.

"Just to think that we've really and truly done it," said Nick, puffing out with either pride or the amount of food he had consumed for supper; "and right at this minute the Motor Boat Club is resting on Florida soil! Why, I can hardly believe it. A year ago I'd have laughed if any fellow told me I'd engage to do one quarter of the stunts we've carried out since we left Philadelphia."

"Oh! you're improving every way," chuckled Josh. "I can even see signs of it in your eating. You've got three of us combined beat to a frazzle right now; and honest Injun, we think that by another month you can stand

off the whole bunch. Long practice makes for success, and we all give you credit for trying your level best, Nick, every time."

It was a lovely night, this their first in Florida. The trees, festooned with the long, swinging, gray Spanish moss, looked like the real tropical thing to all of the boys. And they felt a pride that was surely justifiable, in the success that had attended their cruise down the coast.

"Best thing we ever did, and that's straight," asserted Herb.

"And not one serious accident to mar the record," Jack nodded, his eyes sparkling with satisfaction.

"Of course we don't count those several little adventures of our fat friend here," Josh put in, jerking his thumb in the direction of Nick, "because we all understand that, being such a good-natured fellow, and wanting to keep us in good humor, he did those stunts on purpose. Yes, I agree with the rest of you, that we deserve a whole lot of credit for coming through it all without a serious accident."

"And much of that luck is due to the wise head that piloted the expedition," declared George, generously; "and fellows, I propose that here and now, on the first night we spend on Florida soil, we give Jack Stormways three

good cheers and a tiger, just to show that we appreciate his leadership. Here goes!"

And they were given with a will that must have made Jack's boyish heart swell with pleasure; for who among us but would feel flattered at the expression of admiration from his chums?

The next day they made for Nassau Sound; and happening to strike a favorable time for passing over the few miles in the open, they crossed the bar at the mouth of the St. Johns at just half-past two, continuing up the river to the metropolis of fair Florida.

Here in Jacksonville we will have to leave them for a time, recuperating after their eventful voyage, and making due preparations for continuing the same through Indian River and the keys that dot the whole Florida coast, with New Orleans as their destination.

THE END.

The further interesting and thrilling adventures of the Motor Boat Boys will be found in volume No. 5 of this series, entitled "The Motor Boat Boys Among the Florida Keys; or, A Struggle for the Leadership."

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